

STAR  
WARSTM



# STAR WARS™

**Jedi Quest Omnibus**

**Volume One**

**Jude Watson**



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Star Wars: Path to Truth

Star Wars: The Way of the Apprentice

Star Wars: The Trail of the Jedi

Star Wars: The Dangerous Games

Star Wars: The Master of Disguise

Star Wars: The School of Fear

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This book is not to be sold or distributed!

**Includes**

**Path to Truth Prequel  
&  
Books One Through Five**

## STAR WARS Timeline



### DAWN OF THE JEDI 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**25,793** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
Dawn of the Jedi  
*Dawn of the Jedi*  
Volume One: Force Storm  
Volume Two: Prisoner of Bogan  
Volume Three: Force War



### THE OLD REPUBLIC 5,000-1,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**5,000** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Tales of the Jedi*  
The Golden Age of the Sith  
The Fall of the Sith Empire  
Crosscurrent

**4,000** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Tales of the Jedi*  
Knights of the Old Republic  
The Freedon Nadd Uprising  
Dark Lords of the Sith  
The Sith War  
Redemption

**3,964** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Knights of the Old Republic*  
Volume One: Commencement  
Volume Two: Flashpoint  
Volume Three: Days of Fear, Nights of Anger  
Volume Four: Daze of Hate, Knights of Suffering  
Volume Five: Vector  
Volume Six: Vindication  
Volume Seven: Dueling Ambitions  
Volume Eight: Destroyer  
Volume Nine: Demon  
War

**3,956** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
**KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC**  
*The Old Republic*  
Revan

**3,951** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
**KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS**

**3,678** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*The Old Republic*  
Volume Two: Blood of the Empire

**3,653** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*The Old Republic*  
Deceived  
Volume One: The Threat of Peace

**3,645** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*The Old Republic*  
Red Harvest  
*The Old Republic*  
Fatal Alliance  
Volume Three: The Lost Suns  
Annihilation

#### THE OLD REPUBLIC

**3,638** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
**THE OLD REPUBLIC: SHADOW OF REVAN**

#### THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS OF THE FALLEN EMPIRE

**3,630** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
**THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS OF THE ETERNAL THRONE**

**2,974** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Lost Tribe of the Sith*  
Spiral

**1,032** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Knight Errant*  
Volume One: Aflame  
Knight Errant  
Volume Two: Deluge  
Volume Three: Escape

**1,000** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Darth Bane*  
Path of Destruction  
Jedi vs. Sith  
*Darth Bane*  
Rule of Two  
Dynasty of Evil



### RISE OF THE SITH 1,000-22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**67** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
Darth Plagueis

**53** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
Jedi - The Dark Side

**44** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Jedi Apprentice*  
The Rising Force  
The Dark Rival  
The Hidden Past  
The Mark of the Crown  
The Defenders of the Dead  
The Uncertain Path  
The Captive Temple  
The Day of Reckoning  
The Fight for Truth  
The Shattered Peace  
Special Edition: Deceptions

**43** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Jedi Apprentice*  
The Deadly Hunter  
The Evil Experiment  
The Dangerous Rescue

**41** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Jedi Apprentice*  
The Ties that Bind  
The Death of Hope  
The Call to Vengeance  
The Only Witness  
The Threat Within

**38** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan*  
The Aurorient Express  
The Last Stand on Ord Mantell

**33** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
Jedi Council - Acts of War  
Maul: Lockdown

**32** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Republic*  
Volume One: Prelude to Rebellion  
Darth Maul  
*Episode I Adventures*  
Search for the Lost Jedi  
The Bartokk Assassins  
The Fury of Darth Maul  
Jedi Emergency  
The Ghostling Children  
The Hunt for Anakin Skywalker  
Capture Arawynne  
Trouble on Tatooine  
Rescue in the Core  
Festival of Warriors  
Pirates from Beyond the Sea  
The Bongo Rally  
Cloak of Deception  
Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

#### EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE

## **BOUNTY HUNTER**

Jango Fett - Open Seasons  
*Republic*  
Volume Two: Outlander  
Volume Three: Emissaries to Malastare  
Volume Four: Twilight  
Infinity's End

**30** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Republic*  
Volume Five: The Hunt for Aurra Sing  
Volume Six: Darkness  
Volume Seven: The Stark Hyperspace War  
The Devaronian Version  
Volume Eight: Rite of Passage

**29** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
Rogue Planet

**28** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Jedi Quest*  
Path to Truth  
*Jedi Quest*

**27** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
Outbound Flight  
*Jedi Quest*  
The Way of the Apprentice  
The Trail of the Jedi  
The Dangerous Games

**25** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Jedi Quest*  
The Master of Disguise  
The School of Fear  
The Shadow Trap  
The Moment of Truth

**24** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Jedi Quest*  
The Changing of the Guard  
The False Peace  
Starfighter: Crossbones  
*Republic*  
Volume Nine: Honor and Duty

**23** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Jedi Quest*  
The Final Showdown  
*Star Wars Adventures*  
Hunt the Sun Runner  
The Cavern of Screaming Skulls  
The Hostage Princess  
Jango Fett vs. the Razor Eaters  
The Shape-Shifter Strikes  
The Warlords of Balmorra

**22** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
**JEDI STARFIGHTER**

The Approaching Storm  
Blood Ties: A Tale of Jango & Boba Fett

## **EPISODE II: ATTACK OF THE CLONES**

## **REPUBLIC COMMANDO**

## **THE CLONE WARS (VIDEO GAME)**

*Boba Fett*  
The Fight to Survive  
Crossfire

*Clone Wars*  
Volume One: The Defense of Kamino

*Boba Fett*  
Maze of Deception  
Hunted

*Clone Wars*  
Volume Two: Victories and Sacrifices

*Republic Commando*  
Hard Contact

## **CLONE WARS: VOLUME ONE**

SkyeWalkers

*Clone Wars*  
Volume Four: Light and Dark  
The Cestus Deception  
Jedi Trial

*Clone Wars*  
Volume Three: Last Stand on Jabim  
Volume Five: The Best Blades  
Volume Six: On the Fields of Battle

## **THE CLONE WARS: THE MOVIE**

## **THE CLONE WARS: SEASON ONE**

*The Clone Wars: Secret Missions*  
Breakout Squad  
Curse of the Black Hole Pirates  
Duel at Shattered Rock  
Guardians of the Chiss Key

*The Clone Wars*  
Volume One: Shipyards of Doom  
Wild Space  
No Prisoners  
Volume Two: Crash Course

## **THE CLONE WARS: REPUBLIC HERODES**

*The Clone Wars*  
The Colossus of Destiny  
Hero of the Confederacy

Shatterpoint  
*Republic Commando*  
Triple Zero

**21** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
**THE CLONE WARS:  
SEASON TWO**

*The Clone Wars Gambit*  
Stealth  
Siege

*The Clone Wars*  
The Wind Raiders of Talorann  
*Republic Commando*  
True Colors

*Medstar*  
Battle Surgeons  
Jedi Healer

## **THE CLONE WARS: SEASON THREE**

*The Clone Wars*  
Deadly Hands of Shon-Ju  
Strange Allies  
The Starcrusher Trap

## **THE CLONE WARS: SEASON FOUR**

*The Clone Wars*  
The Smuggler's Code  
The Sith Hunters  
Defenders of the Lost Temple

## **THE CLONE WARS: SEASON FIVE**

**20** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
General Grievous

## **THE CLONE WARS: SEASON SIX**

*Clone Wars*  
Volume Eight: The Last Siege, the Final Truth  
Volume Seven: When They Were Brothers

*Boba Fett*  
A New Threat  
Pursuit

**19** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
Yoda: Dark Rendezvous

## **CLONE WARS: VOLUME TWO**

Labyrinth of Evil

**EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH**

*Republic Commando*  
Order 66

*Republic*  
Volume Nine: Endgame

Kenobi

Purge

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader

*Dark Times*

Volume One: The Path to Nowhere

*Darth Vader*

Darth Vader & The Lost Command

Imperial Commando: 501st

*Dark Times*

Volume Two: Parallels

Volume Three: Vector

*Coruscant Nights*

Jedi Twilight

*Darth Vader*

Darth Vader & The Ghost Prison

*Dark Times*

Volume Four: Blue Harvest

Volume Five: Out of the Wilderness

Volume Six: Fire Carrier

Volume Seven: A Spark Remains

**18 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Darth Vader*

Darth Vader & The Ninth Assassin

*Last of the Jedi*

The Desperate Mission

Dark Warning

Underworld

Death on Naboo

A Tangled Web

Return of the Dark Side

Secret Weapon

Against the Empire

Master of Deception

Reckoning

*Coruscant Nights*

Streets of Shadow

Patterns of Force

The Last Jedi

**17 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Darth Vader*

Darth Vader & Cry of Shadows

**15 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

**DROIDS**

**10 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

Droids (Marvel)

*The Han Solo Trilogy*

The Paradise Snare

**5 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Droids (Dark Horse)*

Volume One: The Kalarba Adventures

Volume Two: Rebellion

Volume Three: Season of Revolt

*Jabba the Hutt*

The Gaar Suppoon Hit

The Hunger of Princess Nampi

The Dynasty Trap

Betrayal

*The Han Solo Trilogy*

The Hutt Gambit

**4 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*The Lando Calrissian Adventures*

Lando Calrissian & the Mindharp of Sharu

**3 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*The Lando Calrissian Adventures*

Lando Calrissian & the Flamewind of Oseon

*Boba Fett*

Enemy of the Empire

*The Lando Calrissian Adventures*

Lando Calrissian & the Starcave of Thonboka

**THE FORCE UNLEASHED**

*Death Star*

*Agent of the Empire*

Volume One: Iron Eclipse

**2 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Agent of the Empire*

Volume Two: Hard Targets

*The Han Solo Trilogy*

Rebel Dawn

*The Han Solo Adventures*

Han Solo At Star's End

Han Solo's Revenge

Han Solo and the Lost Legacy

*Adventures in Hyperspace*

Fire Ring Race

Shinbone Showdown

**1 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

**THE FORCE UNLEASHED II**

*Star Wars Adventures*

Han Solo & The Hollow Moon of Khorya

*Dark Forces*

Soldier for the Empire

*Empire*

Volume One: Betrayal

Death Troopers

Underworld - The Yavin Vassilika

*Empire*

Volume Two: Darklighter

**EMPIRE AT WAR**

**X-WING**

Blood Ties: Boba Fett is Dead

**LETHAL ALLIANCE**

**DARK FORCES**

Shadow Games

The Assassination of Darth Vader



**THE REBELLION**

**0-4 YEARS AFTER**

**STAR WARS: A New Hope**

**0 EPISODE IV:  
A NEW HOPE**

**BATTLEFRONT: RENEGADE  
SQUADRON**

**REBEL ASSAULT**

**ROGUE SQUADRON II:  
ROGUE LEADER**

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina

*Empire*

Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective

**ROGUE SQUADRON III:  
REBEL STRIKE**

*Star Wars Missions*

Assault on Yavin 4

Escape from Thyferra

Attack on Delrakkin

Destroy the Liquidator

Scoundrels

*Pizzazz*

The Keeper's World

The Kingdom of Ice

*Star Wars Missions*

Darth Vader's Return

Rogue Squadron to the Rescue

Bounty on Bonodan

Total Destruction



*Rebel Force*  
 Target  
 Hostage  
 Renegade  
 Firefight  
 Trapped

*Allegiance*

*Rebel Force*  
 Uprising

*Empire*  
 Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective

*Classic Star Wars*  
 Volume One: Doomworld  
 Volume Two: Dark Encounters

*Science Adventures*  
 Emergency in Escape Pod Four  
 Journey Across Planet X

*Star Wars Missions*  
 Revolt of the Battle Droids  
 Showdown in Mos Eisley  
 Bounty Hunters vs. Battle Droids  
 The Vactooine Disaster

*Star Wars*  
 Volume One: In the Shadow of Yavin  
 Volume Two: From the Ruins of Alderaan  
 Volume Three: Rebel Girl  
 Volume Four: A Shattered Hope

#### **ROGUE SQUADRON**

*Galaxy of Fear*  
 Eaten Alive  
 City of the Dead  
 Planet Plague

*Empire*  
 Volume Four: The Heart of the Rebellion  
 Volume Five: Allies and Adversaries

*River of Chaos*

*Boba Fett*  
 Man with a Mission

*Galaxy of Fear*  
 Ghost of the Jedi  
 Army of Terror

*Empire*  
 Volume Six: In the Shadows of their Fathers  
 Volume Seven: The Wrong Side of the War

*Galaxy of Fear*  
 The Brain Spiders  
 The Swarm

Choices of One

*Rebellion*  
 Volume One: My Brother, My Enemy  
 Volume Two: The Ahakista Gambit  
 Volume Three: Small Victories  
 Volume Four: Vector

*Boba Fett*  
 Overkill

*Galaxy of Fear*  
 Spore  
 The Doomsday Ship  
 Clones

*Star Wars Adventures*  
 Chewbacca & the Slavers of the Shadowlands

### **1 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Galaxy of Fear*  
 The Hunger

#### **THE STAR WARS HOLIDAY SPECIAL**

*Star Wars Missions*  
 The Hunt for Han Solo  
 The Search for Grubba the Hutt  
 Ithorian Invasion  
 Togorian Trap

*Empire and Rebellion*  
 Honor Among Thieves

*Galaxies: The Ruins of Dantooine*

*Star Wars Missions*  
 Prisoner of the Nikto Pirates  
 The Monster of Dweem  
 Voyage to the Underworld  
 Imperial Jailbreak

### **2 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

#### **STAR WARS: GALAXIES**

#### **TIE FIGHTER**

Splinter of the Mind's Eye

*Star Wars Adventures*  
 Princess Leia and the Royal Ransom  
 Boba Fett and the Ship of Fear

*Epic Collection*  
 The Newspaper Strips Volume One  
 The Newspaper Strips Volume Two

*Empire and Rebellion*  
 Razor's Edge

### **3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

Rebel Heist

#### **EPISODE V: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK**

#### **X-WING ASSAULT**

Tales of the Bounty Hunters

*Star Wars Adventures*  
 Luke Skywalker & the Treasure of the Dragonsnakes  
 The Will of Darth Vader

*Classic Star Wars*  
 Volume Three: Resurrection of Evil  
 Volume Three: Screams of the Void

#### **X-WING VS. TIE FIGHTER**

#### **EWOKS SEASON ONE**

#### **EWOKS SEASON TWO**

#### **EWOKS: CARAVAN OF COURAGE**

#### **EWOKS: BATTLE FOR ENDOR**

*Classic Star Wars*  
 Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#68-72)

#### **SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE**

The Bounty Hunters: Scoundrel's Wages  
 Battle of the Bounty Hunters

*Classic Star Wars*  
 Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#73-81)

#### **REBEL ASSAULT II: THE HIDDEN EMPIRE**



### **THE NEW REPUBLIC 4-24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

### **4 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

Tales from Jabba's Palace

#### **EPISODE VI: RETURN OF THE JEDI**

Mara Jade: By the Emperor's Hand

*The Bounty Hunter Wars*  
 The Mandalorian Armor  
 Slave Ship  
 Hard Merchandise

The Truce at Bakura

*Classic Star Wars*  
 Volume Six: Wookiee World  
 Volume Seven: Far, Far Away

Shadows of the Empire: Evolution

X-Wing: Rogue Leader

*X-Wing: Rogue Squadron*  
 Volume One: The Rebel Opposition  
 Volume Two: The Phantom Affair  
 Volume Three: Battleground: Tatooine  
 Volume Four: The Warrior Princess  
 Volume Five: Requiem for a Rogue  
 Volume Six: In the Empire's Service  
 Volume Seven: Blood and Honor  
 Volume Eight: Masquerade  
 Volume Nine: Mandatory Retirement

*Jedi Prince*  
*The Glove of Darth Vader*  
*The Lost City of the Jedi*  
*Zorba the Hutt's Revenge*  
*Mission from Mount Yoda*  
*Queen of the Empire*  
*Prophets of the Dark Side*

**5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Tales from the New Republic*  
*Boba Fett*  
*Twin Engines of Destruction*  
*Luke Skywalker & the Shadows of Mindor*  
*The Heart of the Jedi*

**JEDI KNIGHT: DARK FORCES II**

*Dark Forces*  
*Rebel Agent*  
*Jedi Knight*

**6 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*X-Wing*  
*Rogue Squadron*

**7 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*X-Wing*  
*Wedge's Gamble*  
*The Kryptos Trap*  
*The Bacta War*  
*Wrath Squadron*  
*Iron Fist*  
*Solo Command*

**8 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*The Courtship of Princess Leia*  
*Tatooine Ghost*

**9 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Thrawn Trilogy*  
*Heir to the Empire*  
*Dark Force Rising*  
*The Last Command*  
*X-Wing*  
*Isard's Revenge*

**10 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

**JEDI KNIGHT: MYSTERIES OF THE SITH**

*Dark Empire Trilogy*  
*Dark Empire*  
*Dark Empire II*

*Boba Fett*  
*Bounty on Bar-Kooda*  
*When the Fat Lady Swings*  
*Murder Most Foul*

**11 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Dark Empire Trilogy*  
*Empire's End*

*Boba Fett*  
*Agent of Doom*

*Crimson Empire*  
*Crimson Empire*

*The Bounty Hunters: Kenix Kil*

*Crimson Empire*  
*Council of Blood*

*Jedi Academy*  
*Jedi Search*  
*Dark Apprentice*  
*Champions of the Force*  
*I, Jedi*

**12 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Children of the Jedi*

**JEDI KNIGHT II: JEDI OUTCAST**

*Darksaber*

**13 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*X-Wing*  
*Starfighters of Adumar*  
*Planet of Twilight*

*Jedi Academy*  
*Leviathan*  
*Crimson Empire*  
*Empire Lost*

**14 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*The Crystal Star*

**JEDI KNIGHT: JEDI ACADEMY**

**16 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Black Fleet Crisis*  
*Before the Storm*  
*Shield of Lies*  
*Tyrant's Nest*

**17 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*The New Rebellion*

**18 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Corellian Trilogy*  
*Ambush at Corellia*  
*Assault at Selonia*  
*Showdown at Centerpoint*

**19 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Hand of Thrawn*  
*Specter of the Past*  
*Vision of the Future*  
*Union*  
*Scourge*

**22 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Junior Jedi Knights*  
*The Golden Globe*  
*Lyric's World*  
*Promises*  
*Anakin's Quest*  
*Vader's Fortress*  
*Kenobi's Blade*  
*Survivor's Quest*

**23 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Young Jedi Knights*  
*Hairs of the Force*  
*Shadow Academy*  
*The Lost Ones*  
*Lightsabers*  
*Darkest Knight*  
*Jedi Under Siege*  
*Shards of Alderaan*

**24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Young Jedi Knights*  
*Diversity Alliance*  
*Delusions of Grandeur*  
*Jedi Bounty*  
*The Emperor's Plague*  
*Return to Ord Mantell*  
*Trouble on Cloud City*  
*Crisis on Crystal Reef*



**NEW JEDI ORDER  
 25-36 YEARS AFTER  
 STAR WARS: A New Hope**

**25 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*New Jedi Order*  
*Vector Prime*

*Invasion*

*Volume One: Refugees*  
*Volume Two: Rescues*  
*Volume Three: Revelations*

*New Jedi Order*

*Dark Tide: Onslaught*  
*Dark Tide: Ruin*  
*Agents of Chaos: Hero's Trial*  
*Agents of Chaos: Jedi Eclipse*

*Chewbacca*

**26 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*New Jedi Order*  
*Balance Point*  
*Edge of Victory: Conquest*  
*Edge of Victory: Rebirth*

**27** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order  
Star by Star  
Dark Journey  
Enemy Lines: Rebel Dream  
Enemy Lines: Rebel Stand  
Traitor

**28** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order  
Destiny's Way  
Force Heretic: Remnant  
Force Heretic: Refugee  
Force Heretic: Reunion  
The Final Prophecy

**29** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order  
The Unifying Force

**35** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dark Nest  
The Joiner King

**36** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dark Nest  
The Unseen Queen  
The Swarm War



**LEGACY**

**40-139 YEARS AFTER  
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

**40** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force  
Betrayal  
Bloodlines  
Tempest  
Exile  
Sacrifice  
Inferno  
Fury

**41** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force  
Revelation  
Invincible  
Crosscurrent  
Riptide

**43** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Millennium Falcon  
Fate of the Jedi  
Outcast  
Omen  
Abyss  
Backlash

**44** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Fate of the Jedi  
Allies  
Vortex  
Conviction  
Ascension  
Apocalypse  
X-Wing  
Mercy Kill

**45** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Crucible

**137** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy  
Volume One: Broken  
Volume Two: Shards  
Volume Three: Claws of the Dragon  
Volume Four: Alliance  
Volume Five: The Hidden Temple  
Volume Six: Legacy  
Volume Seven: Storms  
Volume Eight: Tatooine  
Volume Nine: Monster  
Volume Ten: Extremes

**138** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy  
War

Legacy II  
Volume One: Prisoner of the Floating World  
Volume Two: Outcasts of the Broken Ring

**139** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy II  
Volume Three: Wanted: Ania Solo  
Volume Four: Empire of One



## Contents

<b>Path to Truth</b>	<b>01</b>
<b>The Way of the Apprentice</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>The Trail of the Jedi</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>The Dangerous Games</b>	<b>339</b>
<b>The Master of Disguise</b>	<b>465</b>
<b>The School of Fear</b>	<b>571</b>



**Prequel**  
**Path to Truth**





STAR  
WARS.

# JEDI QUEST

BY JUDE WATSON

**PATH TO TRUTH**





## CHOSEN TO RISE. DESTINED TO FALL.

*Anakin Skywalker is no longer a boy, but not yet a man. Almost thirteen, he has begun to travel on the path that will lead him to glory...and infamy.*

*In the mysterious caves of Ilum, Anakin must create his lightsaber after confronting the demons of his past — and his future. Once the lightsaber is completed, Anakin joins his Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, on a mission that will cut to the heart of his fear, anger, and power.*

*When Anakin was a young slave on Tatooine, everyone lived in terror of a creature named Krayn, who kidnapped slaves for his own profit — and killed anyone who got in his way. Now Krayn's evil has grown to a dangerous degree, threatening peace and safe passage throughout the galaxy.*

*Anakin and Obi-Wan must stop Krayn. But can Obi-Wan also stop Anakin from seeking vengeance against an old enemy?*

*The path to truth is a clear one.*

*Anakin's path is not.*



## Prologue

No one on Tatooine could remember a day this fine. The two suns shone, but their rays did not blister the skin. The wind blew, but it was a gentle wind that did not bring choking dust and sand. The normally brutal climate had loosened its grip. Most of the moisture farmers, smugglers, and slaves of Tatooine didn't have the time or energy to look up from their hard lives to notice it.

Seven-year-old Anakin Skywalker did. When his mother, Shmi, opened the windows at dawn, the two of them stood breathing in the fresh air with wonder. For the first time in a long while, Anakin considered himself lucky. Today the weather was good, and he had his first afternoon off.

Day after day he was cooped up in Watto's junk shop. He was a slave, but it wasn't the worst job he could imagine. He learned about hyperspace engines and power converters and droid motivators. He could assemble a reactivate switch blindfolded. The only trouble was, he had to work for the Toydarian Watto, whose temper and greed constantly surprised Anakin, growing worse by the day.

Anakin crammed his breakfast in his mouth as he hurried through the crowded streets of Mos Espa toward Watto's shop. He broke into a run, sliding easily between two careening copies. Today Watto had to make a journey to Anchorhead. He had

## Jude Watson

heard of a spectacular crash between two sand skimmers and a space frigate, and he was anxious to be first to bid for the parts.

The trip placed Watto in a bind, for his excitement at the thought of striking a deal battled with his irritation at closing the store for a day.

All week the air had been full of the angry buzzing of Watto's wings and his muttered comments about how life was unfair to hardworking beings like him.

Watto couldn't bear to lose money, even for a day, but he didn't trust Anakin to run the shop. Neither could he bear to give his slave a day off.

So Watto had left Anakin a long list of chores to do, a list long enough to guarantee that Anakin would be in the closed shop from sunrise to sundown.

What Watto didn't count on was that Anakin had friends to help him.

Not living beings — everyone he knew his age was a slave, too. Anakin considered droids his friends, and he knew that with their help he could get his chores done in half the time.

As soon as he reached the shop, he programmed the droids and got to work. Many of the droids were old models or half fixed, but he managed to keep them going. By midday, the chores were done.

Anakin picked up the pack Shmi had filled with meat pies and fruit that morning. He hurried all the way back to where he lived, breathing deep lungfuls of air as he ran. His friend Amee was a house slave for a rich Toong couple. They gave her one afternoon off a month. This was it.

Amee waited outside on the steps of her dwelling in the crowded, layered stack of hovels in Mos Espa. Her chestnut hair was worn in a braided crown around her head. She had woven some yellow flowers through her braids. It added to the holiday feeling of this day. Her thin face, usually so serious, looked almost pretty as she smiled.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

"I've never been on a picnic," she said. "Mother says she used to go on them when she was a girl." Amee's mother, Hala, opened the door and smiled at Anakin. Her job was to work on transmitter parts at home. "I'm glad you'll both get to enjoy the day. Don't go far."

"I know just the spot," Anakin told her.

Amee followed him through the crowded lanes and streets of Mos Espa.

There were even more beings packed in the streets today. Amee and Anakin had learned how to move through the streets almost invisibly, avoiding the fierce tempers of the spacers and smugglers.

Anakin knew exactly where they should share their picnic, even though he'd never been on one, either. He had found the spot weeks before while searching for junked parts on the outskirts of the spaceport.

Tatooine's hills were sandy and barren, but nestled among them Anakin had discovered a small canyon. There, he found a tree with flickering green-gold leaves. He had never seen the species before, and it was the first time he had seen such a color in a natural form. Tatooine was a land of variations of beige and tan.

The tree was scrawny and struggled to survive, but when you sat underneath it and closed your eyes, you could hear the rustle of dry leaves. On a day like today, with the air so fresh, you could almost pretend you were on a beautiful green planet.

"It's perfect," Amee breathed.

They feasted on Shmi's meat pies and Hala's turnovers. They drank sweet juice and planned their futures, which always included Anakin liberating all the slaves on Tatooine. The sun slid lower in the sky.

Suddenly, the afternoon was over.

"I guess we'd better get back," Anakin said reluctantly.

"I hate being a slave," Amee said. She shoved the food wrappings into her pack with unusual force.

## Jude Watson

There wasn't any reply Anakin could make. They all hated being slaves.

Anakin vowed that someday Shmi would live a soft, pleasant life, filled with leisure and good things to eat, just like this day. He would see to it.

He and Amee slogged through the sandy hills and down into the streets of Mos Espa. To their surprise, the streets were now almost empty, the food stalls shuttered.

"What's going on?" Anakin wondered. "It's like there's a sandstorm coming, but the air is so clear."

As they got closer to their homes, their unease increased. On the outskirts, they saw shattered entrances and wreckage in the street. They passed a man crying into his hands. Sobs shook his thin shoulders.

Anakin and Amee exchanged a wordless glance. The fear that always hummed under the surface of their lives sparked and became a living current. Something was very wrong.

A woman ran by them, her eyes streaming tears. "Elza!" she screamed.

"Elza!"

"Elza Monimi," Amee said, panic beginning to shade her voice. "He's our neighbor. What's happening?"

They began to run. Every other house seemed to be damaged. Beings mingled in the streets, asking one another for news of daughters, sons, mothers, whole families. They heard a whispered name, a name repeated over and over in tones of dread and horror.

Anakin stopped a neighbor, Titi Chronelle. "What happened?"

"Slave raid," Titi told him. "Pirates. Led by Krayn. With blasters and restraining devices. They have transmitters that override our own. They can steal whoever they want. Many were taken." Titi spoke in short bursts, as if he could not manage a whole sentence.

Anakin felt his own breath leave him. "My mother?" Titi looked at him sadly before rushing on. "I don't know."



## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

Without another word, Amee took off toward her own dwelling. Anakin ran, his heart bursting, his legs pumping. He charged into his home. He looked around wildly.

Everything seemed the same. But where was Shmi?

Then he saw her in the corner. Her knees were drawn up against her chest, her head buried. As he started toward her, she jerked her head up.

For a moment, he saw sheer terror in her face. Shock paralyzed him. He had never seen his mother afraid. For him, she was the image of calm strength. She held all the terrors of life at bay for him.

As she took in his expression, the wild look in her eyes instantly disappeared. The warm light he knew so well came back. She held out her arms to him, and he rushed to her.

"I didn't know where you were," she said.

He felt her strong arms surround him and buried his face in the familiar scent of her clothes. She rocked him gently.

"You're shaking," she said. "Hush, Annie. We're both safe."

Somehow he knew that the terror he'd seen on her face was not just because she could not find him. It was because of what she had seen. Of what had almost happened to her.

But that fear, the fear that his mother could disappear, that she could be hurt or killed, that she could be at the mercy of her own terror, was just too great for him to face. He pushed the thought of her anguished face away and breathed in her warmth, felt the strength and gentleness of her hands soothing him. Instantly, the shaking stopped. He told himself he had not seen her vulnerability. His mother could not be vanquished. She could not be taken. She could not be hurt. The core of her was strength.

She could keep them both safe. That was his reality. Somehow Anakin knew that if he acknowledged Shmi's fear he would close the door on his own childhood. He wasn't ready to do that. He was seven years old. He needed her too much.

## Jude Watson

Outside, they heard voices. A deep voice calling, trying to override a high, frightened one.

"Amee! Come back!"

"Where's my mother?"

Anakin looked up. "It's Amee."

Shmi's grip on him tightened. "Hala was taken by the slave raiders."

He looked into her face. The terror was gone, but sadness was there now, deep sadness and compassion, and also something else, something remote that he could not decipher. As though she knew something he did not, and would not tell him — he did not want or need to know.

"It is a terrible thing to be a slave on Tatooine, Annie," Shmi whispered. "But it could be far, far worse for us."

She pushed his hair off his forehead. The remote look left her eyes.

"But you are safe," she said in a firm voice. "We are together. Now, come.

Let us do what we can to comfort Amee and her father."

Anakin rose. He stood on the threshold of his dwelling for a moment, watching Shmi cross to console Amee and her father. Owners were now walking among the milling beings, checking on the slaves. Anakin saw Hala's owner, Yor Millto. Millto was checking off something on a datapad.

"A nuisance, to lose Hala," he said to his assistant. "This will cost me. But she wasn't highly skilled. *Easy to replace.*"

Anakin's gaze went to Amee. Her face was buried in Shmi's robes, and her thin shoulders shook with her wracking sobs. Hala's husband sat nearby, his face in his hands.

Easy to replace...

Pain tore through Anakin, pain he did not want to face.

He made a vow. He knew he had an extraordinary memory. Organization and learning came easily to him. He would use that power to sear this memory into his mind and heart. When he needed this, he would recall every detail — the exact shade of

## **STAR WARS: Path to Truth**

blue of the sky, the heartbreaking quality of Amee's uncontrollable sobs.

There was only one thing he would train his mind not to recall, one thing he never wanted to see again, even in memory — the terror he had glimpsed on his mother's face.



# Chapter One

Six years later...

Obi-Wan Kenobi squinted through the viewscreen of the small, sleek craft, a transport on loan from the Senate. Mist swirled around and below him. He could not see a landing site.

"Anything?" Anakin asked. With zero visibility, his Padawan was using instruments to pilot the transport. That, and his sure connection to the Force. At only thirteen years of age, Anakin was already an expert pilot, even better than Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan would be the first to admit it.

"Not yet. The mist will clear in a moment." He hoped. He knew that the craggy peaks of the ice mountains were close. The trick was to find a landing site.

"And then will you tell me why we're here?" Anakin asked.

"All in good time." Obi-Wan noted that the mist was beginning to thin.

Patches of a lighter gray streaked through the clouds. Suddenly, as the craft lowered, the icy peaks appeared, looming out of the clouds, a flash of silver against a sea of gray.

Obi-Wan consulted the coordinates for his destination, then searched the crags for a likely landing spot. All he could see around him was the blinding white of ice and snow. He knew

## Jude Watson

that the seemingly sheer mountainsides concealed ledges and hidden caves. Sheets of ice made for treacherous possibilities.

At last he spotted a ledge that was protected from the wind. It was clear of snow and he saw only isolated patches of ice. It would be a tight fit, and there was always the danger the craft would slide on the ice straight off the ledge, but he knew his Padawan could do it "There," he told Anakin, and gave the coordinates. The boy looked at him, surprised. "Really?"

"You can do it."

"I know I can do it," Anakin said. "I'm just wondering why you *want* me to."

"Because it's an easy climb to our destination from there."

Anakin flipped switches to begin the landing procedures. "And I know better than to ask what that is."

Obi-Wan sat back and watched in admiration as, with cool nerves and a steady hand, Anakin expertly maneuvered the ship into the tight space. He set the ship down as gently as if their landing pad were a nest of kroyie eggs. There would be just enough room to activate the hatch and clamber out.

Anakin looked out the viewscreen at the sheer icy cliffs surrounding them. "Can you tell me what this planet is, at least?"

"Ilum," Obi-Wan answered, watching his Padawan's expression carefully.

The name brought a spark of recognition to Anakin's face. His bright eyes flashed. Still, he kept his tone guarded. "I see."

"We are not here on a mission," Obi-Wan continued. "It is a quest. It is here that you will gather the crystals to fashion your own lightsaber."

Anakin's sober face cracked with the grin that Obi-Wan had come to look forward to seeing, a smile that radiated pleasure and hope.

"Thank you for this honor," he said.

"You are ready," Obi-Wan replied.

"The Council thinks so?" Anakin asked.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

It was a shrewd question. As a matter of fact, the Council was divided on Anakin Skywalker's readiness to take on the full rights of a Jedi. There were those who thought he had come to Jedi training too late. They worried about the anger and fear that he pushed away deep inside him. They worried about his early life as a slave, about his fierce ties to the mother who had let him go.

Yoda and Mace Windu were among those who were cautious, and who had given Obi-Wan many uneasy moments. He respected their viewpoint too much to discount it completely.

But his promise to his former Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, was more important. Qui-Gon had been dead for four years now, but he was such a vivid presence in Obi-Wan's life that he considered their bond just as strong. Taking on Anakin as his Padawan was not only a vow to his beloved former Master, but also the right thing to do.

In the end, Obi-Wan had to trust his own instincts. Yoda and Mace Windu must trust them, too. He had lobbied hard in order to bring his Padawan here, and finally, the Council could not oppose him.

He hoped his decision was the right one. In his short time at the Temple, Anakin's progress had been astonishing. By everything that was measurable, he exceeded expectations. He was at the top of his class in lightsaber training, piloting, memory skills, and the most important goal of all — connection to the Force.

Yet it was exactly his quick progress that gave Obi-Wan pause. Things came too easily to him. There was a danger of recklessness and arrogance inherent in his power. Anakin had a tendency to take matters into his own hands. He could be impetuous and make his own way, disregarding advice.

Just as Obi-Wan once did. Just as Qui-Gon once did. That was what Obi-Wan always came back to. He had made grave mistakes at Anakin's age. He wanted to allow Anakin the freedom to do the same.

## Jude Watson

They pulled on their winter survival gear, fastening thermal coats over their tunics and pulling gloves over their hands. They lowered goggles over their eyes. The temperatures on Ilum were numbingly cold. Blizzards struck without warning. Ice formations had treacherous sharp edges.

They opened the hatch and carefully stepped onto the icy ground. There was only a small amount of ledge between them and a drop of thousands of meters. The wind cut into the exposed parts of their bodies, the tips of their noses and chins. The sun was just a pale suggestion in the sky, a frosty color almost indistinguishable from the white sky and the colors of ice and snow.

"Where is the Crystal Cave?" Anakin asked. Obi-Wan pointed. "Up. We have to scale this cliff." Anakin regarded the cliff carefully. It was a sheer sheet of blue ice, smooth as a mirror. There were no handholds or footholds visible. Any misstep would send them flying into the open air.

"So this is the easy climb," he said. "Tell me something. Why did the Jedi choose such a hazardous spot to keep the Ilum crystals? Wouldn't it make sense to remove them from the cavern and keep them in a safe place?"

Even a thousand years ago, they had to have a better idea."

"The crystals grow in the cave," Obi-Wan answered as he reached for the cable launcher on his utility belt. "This is where we must gather them.

The challenge is part of the reward."

The wind whipped a strand of stray sandy hair away from Anakin's cheek. His gaze snapped with the exhilaration of the adventure ahead. "I'm not complaining. It looks like fun." He flashed a mischievous grin.

Obi-Wan nodded. There was something about this boy that wound around his heart. During the course of their missions together he had seen firsthand Anakin's impulsive generosity, his loyalty, his thirst to learn.



## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

*Remember, Padawan, that most beings are essentially unknowable. There are mysteries at the heart that can surprise even those who think they know themselves.*

Obi-Wan turned away so that Anakin could not see his wry smile. Qui-Gon was in his head so often. It was as though his presence was so powerful that he could never die. Obi-Wan was grateful for it. He missed his friend and Master with a keenness that had not diminished with the years.

He activated the cable launcher and the sharp spike bit into the ice above. He tested the line.

"Remember to factor in the wind," he told Anakin. "There is wind shear on the mountain. The gusts can come from any direction. Keep your body loose. Pay attention to balance at all times. The ice is not as smooth as it appears. There will be formations that can cut you."

Anakin nodded. The dancing light had left his eyes; they now seemed opaque and expressionless. Obi-Wan recognized the look. Anakin had an ability to summon stillness in a moment. He went somewhere that Obi-Wan could not reach. Obi-Wan knew he was gathering his will and the Force for the difficult climb ahead.

Anakin launched his own cable and tested it. After a nod from Obi-Wan, the two activated the lines and let themselves be hauled up at dizzying speed to hang suspended. Obi-Wan chipped at the ice with a sharp implement to create his next foothold. He glanced over to make sure that Anakin was doing the same.

Suddenly the biting wind gusted. It hit him broadside, causing him to momentarily sway against the ice cliff. Obi-Wan twisted so that his shoulder protected his face from the ice.

He slipped one foot into the crevice he'd created and hauled himself up slightly. Then he created a crevice for one hand. This was the tricky part, requiring perfect balance. Carefully, he loosened his cable launcher for the next assault on the ice. The wind suddenly flipped around from the other direction,

## Jude Watson

slamming him against the ice. He lay as flat as he could against the cliff, digging in with his fingers. It felt as though a giant hand was trying to fling him off the face of the mountain.

As soon as the wind gusts subsided, he activated the cable line again.

Only two more launches and they would be at the high, narrow ledge that opened out into the Crystal Cave.

Anakin had already launched himself high in the air. He worked quickly with his sharp tool, digging another foothold into the ice cliff. Obi-Wan could see that despite his speed Anakin was struggling with the wind gusts that slammed him against the cliff.

Obi-Wan took the lead in order to slow Anakin's pace a bit. They leapfrogged up the cliff, pausing to wait out the wind gusts. At last Obi-Wan was able to reach the lip of the cliff above. He looked over at Anakin, who gave him a nod. At the same moment, they launched themselves up to the safety of the cliff ledge.

But they were not safe. Obi-Wan paused, teetering a bit on the edge.

Surprise caused him to almost step back. A group of gorgodons were lying directly in front of them, sleeping near the mouth of the Crystal Cave.

They were large, hulking creatures native to Irum. Usually their feeding grounds were on the icy plains below, where they thrived on lichen and scrub. Obi-Wan knew that they were expert climbers, but he had never heard of them up this high.

They were also fierce predators. "Be still," he whispered to Anakin.

If they were lucky, the beasts would not see them. Their eyesight was poor, but their hearing and sense of smell were excellent.

"What are they?" Anakin breathed.

"Gorgodons," Obi-Wan murmured. "Triple rows of teeth, sharp claws.

## **STAR WARS: Path to Truth**

They dispatch their victims by squeezing them to death. The only way to kill them is a blow to the back of the neck."

Anakin regarded them warily. "Anything else?" he whispered as a gust of wind swept the ledge.

The wind must have carried their scent, for one of the gigantic creatures stirred. "Yes," Obi-Wan said. "Watch out for their — "

Suddenly a large, reptilian tail whipped out from the closest gorgodon, smacking Anakin and sending him flying back toward the cliff edge.

"Tails!" Obi-Wan shouted, vaulting after him.

## Chapter Two

Anakin was thrown back by the force of the blow. His foot slid on an ice patch, sending him careening close to the edge of the cliff.

Obi-Wan leaped. With one arm, he kept his lightsaber slashing at the tail, which continued to flail toward Anakin. With the other hand, he reached out and yanked Anakin to safety.

Anakin recovered his balance immediately and activated his training lightsaber. It was not capable of the same power as a Jedi lightsaber, but it could protect him somewhat. It was up to Obi-Wan to ensure that his Padawan wasn't vulnerable.

The gorgodons were roused now. They awoke in a fury, jaws snapping and eyes rolling. They roared, the fur sticking up now in sharp spikes. They bared their triple rows of sharp yellow teeth at the intruders.

Obi-Wan and Anakin had no choice. The gorgodons were prepared to fight to the death.

As usual before a battle, Obi-Wan's mind went clear and still.

*Look for the weakness in the strength.*

Yes, Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan thought. *Their great size makes them powerful, but it also makes them clumsy. I will use that.*

The largest gorgodon loped toward him. It had the dead relentless gaze of a predator as it raised a paw as big as a gravsled

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

to swat Obi-Wan. He was sure he would be sent flying off the cliff if it connected.

The blow was slow in coming, at least for the reflexes of a Jedi. Obi-Wan had time to contemplate his move and the likely counterattack. Mindful of Anakin, he rolled to the right, drawing the gorgodon in that direction.

The creature swung out with its tail as it missed, as Obi-Wan expected it to. Obi-Wan struck a blow to the gorgodon's side. He felt the impact shudder through his lightsaber. The skeletal structure of the gorgodon was extraordinarily strong, as well as covered by deep layers of fat and muscle. It would take more than one blow to fell such a creature.

At the same time, Anakin leaped to the side, slashing at the giant paw with his lightsaber. The creature gave a howl as the two blows connected.

It whirled around with surprising speed, the lethal tail whipping forward toward Anakin. This time the boy was prepared. He leaped backward, somersaulting in the air to give himself momentum. When he came down, he delivered a blow to the gorgodon's nose that surprised the animal.

Another roar brought the other gorgodons closer to protect their comrade. Tails slashed and paws rose, claws ripping at their clothing.

There was little time for Obi-Wan or Anakin to strike any effective blows.

They were too busy trying to stay out of the way.

Suddenly Obi-Wan's foot hit a patch of black ice. Hidden by the shadows, the ice was slick and deadly. He slid helplessly straight toward the gorgodon. The great beast bared its yellow teeth and raised its massive arms to pin him between them.

Anakin accessed the Force and leaped as high as he could. He came down on a paw, which flicked him off like a flimsy durasheet. The boy flew back and hit the cave wall, dazed.

Obi-Wan regained his balance and struck out in a furious series of moves. His lightsaber was a blur as he dived, feinted,

## Jude Watson

and reversed, striking blow after blow at the gorgodon's paws and body. The blows wouldn't kill it, but they did slow it down. One angry, earsplitting roar followed another. Obi-Wan moved so fast the gorgodon could not track him.

Anakin's head cleared and he raced forward to join Obi-Wan. He did not notice that another gorgodon had craftily moved to cut him off. Anakin was directly in the creature's path, caught between the gorgodon and the sheer cliff.

Obi-Wan leaped forward. The only course open to him was to place himself between the creature and Anakin. He struck out at the creature's face with his lightsaber, but he saw the giant paws come together, trapping him. Obi-Wan's breath left his body at the blow. The gorgodon brought Obi-Wan to his chest in a death-hug.

Obi-Wan's face was buried in the foul-smelling fur. He choked, struggling to fill his lungs. Instead, he breathed fur. The animal squeezed him tighter. He was afraid his ribs would crack. His last reserves of breath whooshed out of his body. He tried to move his arms, but he was pinned.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a blur. A second later the animal howled, and its grip loosened just a bit. He realized that Anakin had used his cable launcher. The sharp end had dug into the gorgodon's fleshy back.

Now Anakin was above him, on top of the creature.

The gorgodon's grip intensified. Obi-Wan fought to stay conscious as his vision went gray. He kicked out with his feet, but it was like kicking the face of the mountain.

Just when he thought he could hold out no longer, the gorgodon's grip lessened and its arms opened, dropping Obi-Wan abruptly to the hard ground.

He scrambled out of the way as the animal fell dead. Clinging to the gorgodon's neck, Anakin launched himself off the animal's body to land clear. He'd been able to fell the creature at the soft, vulnerable point in its neck.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

The other gorgodons smelled the death of their comrade. With surprising speed, they dug their sharp claws into the cliff face and began to scramble up the ice to the next peak.

Panting, Anakin turned off his training lightsaber. Obi-Wan rose slowly to his feet, still struggling to catch his breath. They both paused, their clothing torn by the gorgodon's claws, their hair matted with sweat.

Obi-Wan peeled off his goggles and Anakin did the same.

He grinned at his Padawan. "Thanks for that. Now comes the hard part."

Anakin wiped sweat off his forehead. "Glad to hear it. I was getting bored."

Despite his words, Obi-Wan could see that the battle had drained Anakin. His Padawan hated to show weakness. Yet Obi-Wan also knew that Anakin would recover quickly.

"We should remove our survival gear here," Obi-Wan said, stripping off his gloves. "We won't need it inside the cave. The crystals are deep within. To reach them, you will have to pass through visions and voices.

Some of them may frighten you. Some of them are drawn from your own past.

They are your deepest fears. That is what you must face."

Anakin now stood in his tunic. The cold wind did not cause him to shiver. His shoulders squared, and he took a step toward the cave. "I am ready."

Obi-Wan put a hand on his sleeve. "Remember your training, Anakin," he said. "Let your fear enter you. Do not battle it. There is no shame in it.

Your feelings are your strength. Experience them and let them go as you proceed toward your goal. There are lessons to be learned even from fear and anger. Face those lessons and move on with calm and justice."

"I know all these things," Anakin said, a trace of impatience in his voice.

"No," Obi-Wan said softly, "you do not. But you will."

## Jude Watson

Once inside the cave, they were plunged into darkness. The walls of the cave were of black stone. The stone was smooth and shiny, but it swallowed light rather than reflected it. Entering the cave was like entering a void.

"Should I use a glow rod?" Anakin's voice echoed. "No. Wait for your eyes to adjust."

Obi-Wan reached into his tunic and took out a small pouch. He placed it in Anakin's hand. "Here is the hilt you worked on and the other components. After you find the crystals, you will fashion the lightsaber to your own hand. Do not rush the task. Some Jedi take days or weeks to make it. However long it takes you, I will wait. We will stay on Ilum as long as necessary."

Now they could distinguish the shape of the walls around them and the stray rocks in their path. Obi-Wan walked farther into the cave and gestured at the black walls. "Here is our history."

Over the centuries, Jedi history had been recorded on the walls of the cave. The drawings were made of strong shapes and lines, just enough to suggest the truth of a scene or the character of a Jedi. Names were inscribed in rows that went from the ceiling to the floor. There were also signs and symbols that Obi-Wan and Anakin didn't understand.

*Go back. Here is what you fear.*

The voice was a murmur, more like a running brook. Anakin looked at Obi-Wan questioningly.

"It begins now," Obi-Wan said softly. "You must go forward alone."

A Jedi stepped forward from the cave wall. His tunic fell all the way to the tips of his bare feet. The lightsaber he held looked like an ancient weapon. His expression was so fierce that Anakin stopped dead. "There are so many pleasures in the galaxy. Why do you deprive yourself? The Jedi path is narrow. Why choose it? It will only bring you grief."



## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

Obi-Wan waited to see what his Padawan would do. The time for his instruction was over. After a moment, Anakin walked forward, and the Jedi Knight disappeared.

Anakin was soon swallowed up by the darkness of the cave. Obi-Wan could wait by the entrance, but he had only been to the cave once, years ago, and he found his curiosity just as strong. His steps took him farther into the cave. He was willing to lose sight of Anakin; he knew his Padawan must face the cave alone. But he did not want him to get too far away.

He saw a shape move toward him. A tall Jedi, powerfully built but still graceful. A rugged face with compassionate eyes.

"Master," he breathed. Qui-Gon smiled.

Obi-Wan's heart cracked. Joy rushed through him. Tears sprang to his eyes.

"I have missed you."

Qui-Gon said nothing. He made a gesture across his throat, as though he could not speak. His image, Obi-Wan saw now, shimmered faintly.

Suddenly, Qui-Gon whirled and his lightsaber was in his hand. He struck again and again at an unseen enemy. Obi-Wan stumbled back, his hand on the hilt of his lightsaber. He knew that this was not truly Qui-Gon, that his Master was not in danger, but the impulse to help was so strong he nearly drew his weapon.

Before he could do so, Qui-Gon suddenly staggered. Now he was facing Obi-Wan. He saw the shock in his Master's eyes.

It was how he had looked when he'd received the death blow from the Sith Lord.

"No!" Obi-Wan shouted. He could not relive that moment again. He could not. *This is not my test, Master. It is my Padawan's. Do not do this to me....*

Qui-Gon fell to his knees. His eyes remained on Obi-Wan. The sadness in his gaze tore into Obi-Wan, searing and hot.

The image disappeared, only to reappear a heartbeat later. Again, he saw Qui-Gon double over. Again, he saw him sink to

## Jude Watson

his knees. Obi-Wan was as helpless to reach out as he'd been four years earlier. Was he being taunted with his own failure to prevent his Master's death?

"No," Obi-Wan whispered.

Again and again, he was forced to relive Qui-Gon's slow dying. He groped for calm but could not find it. All he could feel was pain. He raged again at his helplessness. Trapped behind the energy bars, he had watched his Master fall. It was the central event of his life. Why was he forced to relive it here?

On his knees, Qui-Gon reached out to Obi-Wan. This time, the image did not fade. Grief choked Obi-Wan as he took a half step toward his Master.

Something was different this time. Qui-Gon's eyes were not filmed with pain. They were clear. They were holding a message. A warning. A plea. Obi-Wan did not know, "What is it, Master? What are you telling me?"

Qui-Gon shook his head helplessly. His hand trembled as he reached out to Obi-Wan. His fingers could almost touch Obi-Wan's tunic. As they came closer, the image dissolved into shimmering sparks of light.

Obi-Wan was so shaken he fell to his knees as Qui-Gon had. He felt the dampness of his cheeks, marked by tears. He had been given a message, but he could not decipher it.

All he knew was that he had just faced his greatest fear. Since Qui-Gon's death, he had been afraid that he would let down Qui-Gon even as he struggled to uphold his legacy. Was Qui-Gon warning him that he was in danger of failing, after all?

## Chapter Three

Visions and voices. Shadows and echoes. What was so hard about this?

Anakin strode confidently into the depths of the cave. Jedi appeared and disappeared. Voices murmured at him to retreat, that he did not want to face what he had come to face. That despite his connection to the Force, he would never be a true Jedi.

Anakin shook off the voices. He knew the differences between things he could fight and things he could not. Why be afraid of shadows?

Then he stopped dead. He saw himself.

He was seven or eight years old and wore the rough garments of a slave. He sat in a corner by the cave wall, tinkering with an unseen object. Anakin heard the sound of a bell. A musical sound, light and pleasing.

Suddenly, the bell rolled directly toward him. He flinched and it stopped at his feet. Blood poured from the opening and spilled over his boots.

*It isn't blood*, he told himself. He could hear his racing heart pound in his ears. *Shadows and echoes. That's all it is.*

## Jude Watson

He was relieved when the vision of himself disappeared. A moment later a woman emerged from the darkness, her hair down around her shoulders.

Shmi.

"Mother. Mom — "

She did not hear him or see him. She ran straight past him. Tendrils of hair stuck to her cheeks. Her face was shiny with sweat. The sweat of terror. He smelled her terror, felt the air move his hair.

He turned, but she disappeared. Then when he turned forward, there she was. She ran toward him again, her face stretched by horror.

This he could not bear. Anakin squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, another figure had joined Shmi. A huge man, more like a creature than a human. Anakin could not see his face, which was in shadow.

He grabbed Shmi roughly and threw her to the ground like a pile of rubbish.

"No!" Anger pounded in him, and he rushed forward. He seemed to hit an invisible wall and bounced back. The shadowy figure raised a hand to Shmi.

She curled up in a ball to absorb the blow. Her knees were drawn up and her head was tucked down. There was something familiar about the posture that caused dread to fill Anakin.

"No!" Anakin shouted.

Shmi looked directly at him for the first time. He saw the fear, the terror. This seemed familiar to him as well, as though it were a memory rather than a vision. But had he ever seen his mother afraid? Not that he could remember.

He wanted to bury himself in her arms, feel her strength, but he could not. He could not make the fear on her face go away. Was he seeing something that had actually happened? Or was he seeing the future? At that thought, his own fear rose.

Anakin felt the fear as a living thing, an oozing organism that filled his body and threatened to choke him. He fought against it.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

Fear would make him soft. He would make the fear hard. He would twist it and make it into a weapon. A weapon of anger. Anger was productive.

Obi-Wan had told him to accept the fear. He could not do it. If he breathed it in, it would fill his lungs and choke him. But anger he could direct.

"I'll kill you!" he shouted to the shadowy figure. The shadowy figure laughed.

"I will!" Anakin ran at the shadow and could not reach him. The vision disintegrated into particles of light.

With a last despairing look, Shmi disappeared as well.

In frustration, Anakin slammed his hand against the cave wall. Blood began to ooze from fissures.

You cannot save her, a voice said. *No matter how many times you tell yourself you will. It is a dream. She lives the nightmare.*

"Stop," he begged. "Stop."

As if the cave itself had heard him, everything stopped. The cave wall was smooth again. What had looked like blood was now just moisture. The darkness fell around him like a heavy blanket.

Shakily, Anakin moved forward. He felt sweat trickle down his forehead and cheeks. Ahead he saw a faint gleam on the floor of the cave.

"The crystals," a voice said.

He turned. It was Obi-Wan. His Master smiled at him. "It's time."

Anakin's step quickened. He leaned down to examine the cave floor. The crystals grew in intricate formations. Even in the dark cave, they glowed.

He passed his hand over them without touching. He felt vibrations emanate from them. Slowly, he chose the three that seemed to speak to him. To his surprise, it was easy to break the pieces free. He placed them in the pouch hanging from his utility belt.

## Jude Watson

"Before you begin, you must meditate," Obi-Wan said. "Go into a trance state, Anakin. Cleanse your mind. Then your feelings will guide your intent."

Anakin sat on the floor of the cave. He emptied the contents of the pouch onto his lap. He held the three crystals in his palm. They had a strange warmth.

Accessing the Force was not difficult for him, even now. He felt it rise around him from the dirt and rocks and air, and especially from the crystals themselves. He felt comforted by that sureness.

"Now begin." Obi-Wan's voice was soft.

His Master gave him a gentle, encouraging smile. But suddenly, Obi-Wan's face changed. Strange markings covered his skin. Horns sprouted from his bald head. The smile became a smirk, and Anakin saw blackness and evil.

It was Qui-Gon's murderer. Obi-Wan had described him in detail.

Anakin sprang to his feet, scattering the crystals.

"Did I startle you?" the Sith Lord asked. He began to circle around Anakin. "Perhaps you need to work on those Jedi reflexes. You're almost as clumsy as Qui-Gon."

Rage pumped through Anakin. Qui-Gon had risked so much to take Anakin away. He had been the one to see that Anakin could be a Jedi Knight. Anakin owed him everything. He reached for his training lightsaber, but it flew out of his hand.

The Sith laughed. "A child's toy. Try this." He threw something at Anakin. It was a fully fashioned light-saber, beautifully balanced, with an austere hilt. Just the kind of lightsaber Anakin would make.

He activated it, and the laser glowed red.

"Why do you fear your anger?" the Sith Lord asked. In a casual gesture, he activated his own double-edged lightsaber. "Why do you fear your hate? I can feel it. You hate me. It is natural." He bared his teeth.

"After all, I gutted your friend like an animal."

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

With a howl torn from his belly, Anakin threw himself at the Sith.

Their lightsabers tangled. Their faces were close. He could smell the Sith's foul metallic breath.

"You see?" Anakin's enemy purred. "You see what anger can do? It gives you power. It is something you can use, like a weapon. You thought the same thing a moment ago. You will twist your fear into a weapon. Why deny it?"

"No," Anakin said, driving his lightsaber toward the Sith again. "I will learn to let my anger go. I am a Jedi."

"Fool," Qui-Gon's killer hissed. "There are other paths to power."

"It isn't power I seek," Anakin said, his lightsaber tangling with the Sith's again. The shock of the blow made him grip his lightsaber with both hands.

"Then you lie," the dark Lord said, stepping back. "How else will you save that poor, weeping mother you abandoned if you do not have power?"

Anger surged again. Anakin whirled, his lightsaber circling, his body taut. The blow passed through his enemy.

The Sith laughed. "Don't you remember, boy? I am just a vision. Your vision. I am the Master you secretly want. I am the one who will deliver to you what you most desire."

"No!" Anakin screamed. He launched himself forward. Again and again he tried to strike a blow, using every technique he had mastered. The Sith's own lightsaber whirled in a circle, deflecting Anakin's moves.

With a cunning twist, the Sith flipped Anakin's lightsaber from his grasp. It spun in the air, then disintegrated into pieces. Then he reached out a hand. Anakin felt the Force move against his body. He flew through the air and hit the cave wall. His head hit the hard stone and he slid down. When his head cleared, he found himself sitting on the floor, the pieces of the lightsaber in his lap.

## Jude Watson

"The dark side can deliver what you most desire," the Sith Lord said, leaning over him. Anakin could feel his hot breath on his cheek. How could a vision have breath?

"Admit it," Qui-Gon's killer said. He raised his lightsaber for the killing blow.

Anakin summoned up the last shreds of his defiance. He stared down his foe. "I have created you. I can make you go."

His arms still over his head, his lightsaber pulsing, the Sith smiled.

"But I will return. I dwell inside you."

He disappeared, and there was only blackness. Anakin looked down. A completed lightsaber lay in his lap, the very lightsaber the Sith had tossed to him. Was it real? He picked it up and turned it in his hand. He gripped it, and it seemed solid against his fingers, a perfect fit. He activated it, and the shaft of the laser glowed blue, surprising him.

Anakin stood, locking his knees so that his legs wouldn't tremble.

When he was sure he was in complete control, he hurried back to the mouth of the cave.

Obi-Wan was sitting cross-legged in a meditation pose, waiting for him. Surprised, he rose to his feet when he saw Anakin.

"Are you real?" Anakin asked.

"Yes, I am real." Obi-Wan gripped Anakin's arm. "You see?"

Then he caught sight of the lightsaber. Anakin had deactivated it but held it loosely by his side. "What's this?" He held out a hand, and Anakin gave it to him. He gave Anakin an incredulous look. "You made this?"

"I... I must have," Anakin said. He did not want to tell Obi-Wan about his vision of the Sith. "You appeared to me. You told me to go into a trance state. I felt the Force very strongly."

Obi-Wan handed the lightsaber back to Anakin. "This is a good sign, Padawan. You let your feelings guide you. Look what you accomplished. When you allow your instincts to take over,



## **STAR WARS: Path to Truth**

they will not fail you. Remember in the battle of Naboo how you destroyed the Droid Control ship? The Force is always with you."

Anakin nodded. He took comfort from the pleasure and pride in Obi-Wan's voice. Every Jedi went through trials to build a lightsaber. He had overcome terrible visions. He had won. He would not think of the words that the Sith Lord had spoken.

Obi-Wan's comlink signaled. He spoke into it and listened intently.

Then he cut the communication and turned to Anakin.

"We are wanted back at the Temple," he said. "The Council has a mission for us."

A mission! The thought crowded out the disturbing visions. Anakin sprang to his feet. He clipped his new lightsaber onto his belt. At last he could be a true partner to his Master. He would not think of his disturbing trance, the mystery of how the lightsaber was made. It did not matter. This lightsaber had made him a Jedi.

## Chapter Four

"You're fidgeting," Obi-Wan told Anakin.

They stood outside the Jedi Council Room at the Temple. The small waiting area had comfortable seating, but Obi-Wan preferred to stand, and Anakin couldn't sit still. The minutes ticked by, and still they were not called.

"Why do you think Chancellor Palpatine will be in the meeting?" Anakin asked, taking in a slow, deep breath to still his muscles.

"I don't know."

"But you suspect."

"Speculation is a waste of time. Especially," Obi-Wan added, "when you are waiting for the Jedi Council."

"You sound like a droid," Anakin grumbled. "Can't you tell me how you feel?"

"I feel that you are overly anxious about this mission," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin fingered the new lightsaber by his side. He wasn't anxious, but he was impatient. Obviously, the presence of Chancellor Palpatine meant that the upcoming mission was a crucial one. Obi-Wan just didn't want to tell him so. The fact that they were chosen also had to mean that the hesitations that

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

Anakin knew the Jedi Council still held about him must be fading.

The door to a conference room outside the Council Chamber swished open. Anakin's heart speeded up. *Don't fidget*, he warned himself as he stepped into the conference room.

Obi-Wan moved to the center of the room, and Anakin took his place by his Master's side. Members of the Jedi Council surrounded them in seating that conformed to height so that each Jedi had an equal view. The floor-to-ceiling windows presented a panoramic view of the busy sky lanes of Coruscant. Anakin had learned not to be distracted by his keen interest in the many sleek transports that zoomed by. Even the flicker of a glance could catch the disapproval of Mace Windu.

Chancellor Palpatine was standing near Mace Windu. He wore a robe of rich, deep maroon in soft vella cloth. An ornate overcloak of blue swept the tips of his boots. Anakin was reassured to see a welcoming expression on his kindly face. The Chancellor nodded slightly in recognition. They had met on Naboo just after Anakin had been accepted for Jedi training.

"We have been asked by the Senate to undertake an escort mission,"

Mace Windu began. As usual, he did not waste time on preliminaries. "The Council has chosen you to accompany a Colicoid diplomatic ship."

"Dangerous, this mission will not be," Yoda said. "Yet delicate, it is."

Anakin suppressed a sigh. It wasn't that he hoped for danger, exactly.

But a little excitement would be welcome.

"The Colicoids do not welcome the Jedi presence," Obi-Wan guessed.

Anakin always admired how quickly his mind worked.

Yoda nodded. "Yet know it is necessary, they do."

"What is the threat to the ship?" Obi-Wan asked.

## Jude Watson

Chancellor Palpatine gave a quick look to Yoda to ask permission to speak. Yoda blinked his large eyes in agreement.

"The pirate Krayn is known to be in the area in which the Colicoids will be traveling," the Chancellor explained. "He's shown no hesitation in attacking diplomatic vessels in the past, but we think a Jedi team might be a deterrent." Palpatine shook his head gravely. "Krayn and his two associates, Rashtah and Zora, are ruthless. When Krayn hijacks ships, he not only steals their cargo, but sells their inhabitants into slavery."

*Krayn.* Anakin tightened his muscles. What was it about that name that caused his body to react with fear? He felt suddenly cold. Only the discipline he'd learned from Jedi training helped him suppress his body's involuntary shiver.

*Krayn..*

Slave trader. Slave raider.

The name on everyone's lips on that terrible day.

*Raider, trader, raider,* Anakin's brain chanted nonsensically.

Remembering hovered above him, just out of reach. He could only feel the dread it would bring.

Then memory bloomed inside him. It filled his blood like a poison.

Every detail rushed at him, just as he'd sworn to recall them that day.

He remembered the cool, crisp day on Tatooine. A picnic. Flowers woven through Amee's braids. The sweet taste of fruit pastry. And then the sudden shock of hurrying through their row of quarters, seeing faces unrecognizable from terrible fear...

He had burst into his quarters and seen his mother, her legs tucked up against her chest, as if protecting herself from a blow. She had looked up and he had glimpsed terror on her face... *No! He had not meant to remember that!*

The cave! It had been a memory as well as a vision. Anakin understood that clearly now. The events clicked in with frightening vividness. He had suppressed the memory with an act of will. But he had not been able to shut it out forever.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

Now memory had chosen to return at this moment, while members of the Jedi Council had their eyes on him. Anakin almost groaned aloud.

Obi-Wan sensed something. He shifted his weight slightly, drawing a bit closer to Anakin. The unspoken message was clear: *I am here, Anakin.*

*Hang on.*

But Anakin was already conquering his shock. He told himself that he was *meant* to remember now, in this place. Shock hardened into resolve. He had felt Krayn in the cave. He might have been the figure chasing Shmi.

Even though Anakin had never seen the pirate, he knew him. He knew the terror he had spread.

At last there was a chance he could face him. How lucky to have been given this assignment! His hand moved unconsciously to his lightsaber hilt.

"With all respect to the Council and the Senate," Obi-Wan said, "I am not certain that we are the correct team for this assignment."

Anakin could not resist an incredulous look at his Master. What was Obi-Wan doing? They were the perfect team for this assignment!

"The Council might recall that Anakin was once a slave himself," Obi-Wan continued. "He is sensitive to this issue. And as a young Padawan — "

"I am not too young!" Anakin broke in. "And I'm not too sensitive!"

Mace Windu fixed his dark gaze on Anakin, the forbidding look that could cause even a senior Jedi student to suddenly remember each tiny infraction of the rules he or she had committed since the age of five. "We will ask you to speak when we wish your opinion, Anakin."

Anakin was cowed by Mace Windu's reprimand. Mace Windu turned to Obi-Wan with the same severity.

## Jude Watson

"Do you have doubts about your Padawan, Obi-Wan? If so, you must state them. Certainly they are not obvious to the Council, since only recently you stood in that very spot and vehemently argued that he was ready for the trip to Ilum to fashion his own lightsaber."

So Obi-Wan had to fight to take him to Hum. Defiance flared in Anakin.

His chin lifted. So what? If the Council still had hesitations about him, they would soon learn differently.

"Please forgive me for interfering," Chancellor Palpatine interrupted softly. "I think I understand Obi-Wan Kenobi's hesitation. Even in my limited knowledge of Jedi procedures, I understand that Anakin Skywalker is a special case. Naturally the Jedi would wish to protect him more so than another Jedi student."

Anakin's face flushed. A special case! Needing protection! He felt humiliation wash over him.

"Anakin Skywalker is not a special case," Obi-Wan said in a firm voice. "Only his extraordinary abilities set him apart. He is certainly not in need of protection. Perhaps I expressed myself badly. I consider him fully able to conduct any mission the Council wishes to send him on. My hesitation was momentary. I accept the mission for myself and my Padawan."

Slowly, Mace Windu nodded. Yoda did as well, but his gaze lingered on Anakin.

Anakin didn't care. His Master had spoken up for him. They had a mission. Nothing else mattered. And there was a possibility he could meet Krayn face-to-face. That was the most important thing of all.

## Chapter Five

The Colicoid ship was massive and utilitarian. Even the Colicoid diplomatic ships were pressed into service as cargo ships, and the planet's ship designers were known for ingenuity rather than style. They managed to pack more cargo space into a cruiser than anyone in the galaxy. They did this by compressing living space. Cabins and public areas were cramped and oddly shaped, mostly tucked into stray corners. It would not be a luxurious flight.

Luckily Obi-Wan had reached the point where he barely registered his surroundings, except as points of interest for the mission ahead. Anakin, however, was appalled at the sheer ugliness of the Colicoid transport. When it came to spaceships, Anakin was a firm believer in speed and elegance.

"I thought diplomatic ships were supposed to be the best in the planet's fleet," he murmured to Obi-Wan as they boarded. They followed a guide down a narrow hallway, squeezing past equipment panels and cargo boxes.

"This is the best in the fleet," Obi-Wan murmured back.

They reached the bridge. The command center was smaller than it should be for a ship of this size. The pilot crew was jammed up against one another and the tech consoles. Even the ceiling was put into service for cargo — finely spun durasteel

## Jude Watson

nets were suspended there and filled with cargo boxes. The full load blocked out the lighting from above, creating pools of shadow on the bridge. The total effect was one of deep gloom.

"Captain, the Jedi team has arrived," their guide reported.

The captain waved a long hand behind him but did not turn. "Dismissed.

" The guide turned and left. The captain still ignored the Jedi. He stared down at a data screen mounted on the tech console.

Obi-Wan knew the Colicoids were barely tolerating their presence. If the captain wanted to play a game of patience with him, he would not engage. He cautioned Anakin with a look — he was not to betray any impatience. Anakin immediately composed his features and stilled a restless tapping finger on his utility belt. Obi-Wan could still tell his Padawan was restless, but the Colicoids would not.

The Colicoids were an intelligent species with armor-plated trunks, long, antennae heads, and powerful stinging tails. Although renowned as deadly fighters, they had long ago turned their considerable energies toward trade. They had transferred their ruthlessness to commerce and were a wealthy species as a result.

The captain turned at last. His expression was not welcoming. He clicked two of his spidery legs together in impatience.

"I am Captain Anf Dec. We will be departing in six minutes," he said.

"You are free to walk about the ship, but do not get in the way."

Obi-Wan matched the captain's brusque tone. "If any suspicious vessels enter our range, you will notify us?"

"No need for alarm. We do not expect trouble. Or so the Senate tells us." The captain gave an eerie smile that showed straight rows of sharp teeth. "The Jedi are aboard."

"Nevertheless, we expect to be notified if there is a potential problem," Obi-Wan said firmly.



## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

The captain shrugged. "As you wish." The words came like explosive puffs of air. Obviously Captain Anf Dec did not appreciate getting orders, only giving them. "Now go. We are busy."

Obi-Wan and Anakin turned and left the bridge. "Friendly guy," Anakin said.

"I think it's best if we stay out of the Colicoids' way," Obi-Wan responded.

"No problem," Anakin muttered under his breath.

They proceeded to their cramped cabin, which they would have to share.

Anakin placed his survival pack neatly by his narrow sleep-couch. Obi-Wan knew that his Padawan was still upset by the meeting at the Temple. Usually he would have to counsel Anakin at the start of a mission to settle down.

The boy would run on an excess of energy and expectation and want to see everything at once. The Anakin he knew would have tossed his survival pack down and suggested a quick tour of the ship. But this new, silent Anakin merely sat on the sleep-couch and gazed at his surroundings with an uncurious eye.

Obi-Wan debated whether to speak. He knew what was bothering Anakin — the boy was troubled by both the Jedi Council's continuing wariness of his suitability and the implication that he was somehow different from other Jedi students. That did not worry Obi-Wan too much. He knew that Anakin's belief in himself was strong. Anakin was different, and he was learning that this was part of his strength. It did not have to set him apart. And Obi-Wan had told him before that he should not take the Council's rigor personally. It did not mean that they didn't think he would make a fine Jedi. It was their job to look for every possible trouble spot, to be harder on the Jedi students than their Masters would be. No doubt they, as well as he, had noticed Anakin's involuntary movement toward his lightsaber when slave trading was mentioned.

## Jude Watson

No, Anakin's silence was not about the Council's reaction, or Palpatine's words. He was hurt because Obi-Wan had tried to get out of the assignment. It suggested to his Padawan that he did not have faith in him — which was far from the truth.

Words that hurt were spoken in a moment. But words that heal take time and reflection.

Obi-Wan could not reassure Anakin that his words were spoken out of haste. He *was* worried about the effect of this mission on Anakin. If they did engage with Krayn, Anakin's deepest emotions would be tapped. Obi-Wan knew his Padawan had not begun to truly deal with the years of shame and anger he had passed as a slave. Someday he would confront this. Obi-Wan fervently wished that day to be in the future, after Anakin had honed his training.

Yet he had the feeling that this was exactly why Mace Windu and Yoda had chosen them. It was not the first time Obi-Wan had suspected the Council of being too harsh.

They had suspended Obi-Wan once, taken away his Jedi status. He had been thirteen years old, and at the time he had not understood the Council's severity. He was forced to bypass his feelings to examine his own role in his suspension. He had been wrong, and he had come to understand that. The knowledge of this had shamed him. It was only through Qui-Gon's counsel that he had learned that his shame was preventing him from healing.

Could he teach his Padawan the same lesson? Qui-Gon had done it with a characteristic balance of severity and gentleness. No one mixed the two like his Master. Obi-Wan found it difficult to be severe with Anakin. He had been deeply influenced by his Master, but he was not Qui-Gon. He would have to find his own way.

The Master must guard against guiding the Padawan according to his own needs. He or she must balance care and discipline with the acknowledgment of the Padawan's separateness, his or her distinct character.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

Qui-Gon's caution had chafed Obi-Wan at times. Now he completely understood it. The shadow of Xanatos had always stood at Qui-Gon's shoulder. Xanatos had been Qui-Gon's Padawan, and he had turned to the dark side. Qui-Gon had struggled to keep Obi-Wan and Xanatos separate in his mind and actions. He did not want his training of Obi-Wan to be haunted by the ways he might have failed Xanatos. But it was not always easy. Of course Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had gone on to build a rich history together.

Obi-Wan wished the same fierce trust and affection between himself and Anakin. They had already begun to build it.

"I received more information about Krayn before we left," Obi-Wan told Anakin. "You should review this file." He called up the information on his datapad and handed it to Anakin.

"There is a profile of Krayn's ship and his illegal activities as well as background on his two associates. One is a Wookiee named Rashtah. Very fierce, very dangerous. Unusual for a Wookiee to be involved in slave trading, but he's extremely loyal to Krayn. There's another associate called Zora, a human female."

Anakin flipped through the holographic file. "There's not much information here on her."

"No. She joined Krayn about a year ago." Obi-Wan turned away. He knew all about Zora. Yoda and Mace Windu had briefed him privately before he left. Anakin did not have to know yet that Zora was a former Jedi.

More important, Zora was a former friend of Obi-Wan's. Her former name was Siri. She had been in Temple training with Obi-Wan, just a year behind.

He had known her well, or as well as anyone could know her. Her deepest emotions were known only to herself. The two of them had been on missions together as Padawans. Chosen by Council member Adi Gallia as an apprentice, Siri had been acutely intelligent and scrupulously mindful of Jedi rules.

## Jude Watson

Her loyalty to Adi Gallia was unquestioned until they had fallen into a severe disagreement. Adi Gallia was known for her intuition, but not necessarily her warmth. She had taken the most severe path a Master could — she had cut loose her Padawan without recommending her for full Jedi status. Furious, Siri had left the Temple abruptly. Obi-Wan had tried to find her, but she had cut off any contact with the Temple. She had wandered the galaxy. Without her Jedi family, without any ties, she had fallen into bad company. And now she was using her skills to work with Krayn. It was an astonishing transformation, but Qui-Gon had taught Obi-Wan that he should not be surprised by the dark forces that battled within every being. Siri had battled her dark side and lost.

Obi-Wan and Anakin felt the engines thrum underneath their feet. The ship slowly rose from its dockingport, then shot out into a space lane.

Soon they would be far above Coruscant, engaging the hyperdrive.

"Do you think Krayn will attack the ship?" Anakin asked, looking out at the sky through the small view-port.

"The Colicoids don't seem to think so," Obi-Wan said. "Who knows?"

Krayn has a complicated, galaxy-wide operation. He might not want the trouble of tangling with Jedi."

*There was something like disappointment on Anakin's face. He wants to meet up with Krayn,* Obi-Wan realized. It was probably the normal reaction of a young man longing for adventure. Or it could be something darker.

"You seemed to react to Krayn's name during the briefing," Obi-Wan said. "Have you heard of him?" Anakin turned his gaze back to Obi-Wan.

There was the trace of a shadow in his eyes, something that only Obi-Wan would notice, he felt sure. "I know his kind."

## **STAR WARS: Path to Truth**

He was holding something back. He had not really answered Obi-Wan's question. Anakin never lied to him. Obi-Wan realized with a deep sense of unease that he was lying now.

## Chapter Six

"Don't touch that!" A Colicoid officer scurried forward, legs clicking. Anakin stepped back from the equipment console in the tech readout room. They were coming out of hyperspace too soon.

"I wasn't touching it," Anakin said. "I was just looking at it. I've never seen a tech console like this before."

"Well, go away," the officer said, blocking the tech console. "This is not a place for little boys."

Anakin drew his power around him. He knew it was there, a combination of his own will and the Force, easily tapped, always reachable. He fixed his gaze on the officer. "I am not a little boy. I am a Jedi."

The Colicoid was clearly unnerved as the young human boy before him gave him a gaze of such concentrated intensity. It took all of his will to stand his ground.

"Well, go away anyway," he muttered, turning away from that unsettling look. "This is no place for you."

Anakin decided instantly that the tech console was not interesting enough to risk a confrontation. He walked away with a dignity that masked his irritation. The Colicoids were certainly touchy about their ship. In his experience, most beings were happy to indulge in tech-talk and were proud of their ships. The

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

Colicoids didn't seem to bond with their transports, just looked at them as a way to get them from one place to another. Normally he would fill his time poking into the ship's nooks and crannies, but the Colicoid crew was constantly breathing down his neck.

He never knew a mission could be so boring. *If only Krayn would attack!*

Anakin stopped, appalled at the thought that had risen so buoyantly into his mind. Jedi did not wish for confrontation, but met it squarely when it came. They looked for peaceful outcomes. He should not long for a pirate invasion to spice up a dull trip. It was as wrong as wrong could be.

But to be fair, he didn't want Krayn to attack because he was bored.

The thought of the pirate was like a fever in his blood. He wanted — *needed* — to see Krayn face-to-face. He wanted to know if the vision he'd had in the cave was true.

He still felt guilty about lying to Obi-Wan. He could not tell Obi-Wan how memory had burst inside him, a burning memory full of details that were as fresh and painful as they'd been six years before.

Well, he hadn't exactly lied — he simply hadn't given a full answer.

Unfortunately, to the Jedi, that was the same as lying to a Master.

Sometimes the strict Jedi scruples could be extremely annoying.

He could not speak of Krayn. Not yet. If he spoke the memory aloud, it would choke him. He was afraid of the emptiness he felt whenever he remembered his mother. There were so many sleepless nights when he berated himself for the comfort of his sleep-couch at the Temple, for his plentiful meals, his excellent education, but mostly, for his happiness there. How could he continue to take even one more contented breath when his mother languished as a slave on a desolate planet?

## Jude Watson

In the beginning, when he'd first arrived at the Temple, he could call up her voice and smile so easily. He could repeat her soft words to him: *The greatest gift you can give me, Annie, is to take your freedom.*

But her voice was growing fainter, and her smile growing dim.

Sometimes he had to struggle to recall the living reality of her face, the texture of her skin. He had not seen her in four years. He had been so young when he left. His greatest fear was that one day she would leave him completely. That he would lose her like a dream. Then he would be hollow inside.

Obi-Wan Kenobi had been raised in the Temple since he was a baby. He could not truly know how a childhood could be one of terror and shame mixed with comfort and love. He only knew this through his intellect, not his experience. It is one thing to see the effects of a terrible childhood. It is another to live them every day. So when his beloved Master told him he must accept his anger and let it move through him, a small, mean voice in Anakin whispered that his Master did not know what he was talking about. He did not truly know anger.

How could he let such rage move through him? Obi-Wan could never understand how it beat inside him, threatening never to leave. It had the power to consume him. It frightened him, and Anakin did not want to accept fear, either. Did this mean he could never be a Jedi Knight?

When he thought of his fears, his thoughts circled in just this way, bringing a spark of panic deep in his belly. It was better to pretend the anger wasn't there. Wasn't being a Jedi all about control? He had to find his own way to control his feelings. That would be the best way.

Suddenly, Anakin felt a tremor in the ship. It caused him to stumble slightly. The tremor was followed by a blast that sent him flying into the corridor wall. Alarm signals began to sound.

Anakin took off through the maze of twisting corridors toward his quarters to find Obi-Wan. The ship was hit again by



## **STAR WARS: Path to Truth**

another blast, and began to practice defensive maneuvers. Anakin knew the ship was too large to outmaneuver most crafts.

He was halfway there when he saw Obi-Wan running toward him.

"We're under attack. It's Krayn," Obi-Wan said tersely. "Let's head for the bridge."

## Chapter Seven

The two raced into the gloom of the bridge. The crew sat tensely at the controls while a few officers raced from one station to another.

Outside the view-port, they could see vapor trails of proton torpedoes and showers of explosives. The ship shook with every nearby blast. It was an ambush — Krayn must have known where they would appear.

Captain Anf Dec stood, his hands gripping the arms of his control chair. "Where is the ship?" he screamed. "Where is the ship?"

"It dived below us, Captain," one of the crew members shouted.

"Full speed ahead! Full speed! No, left engines full!" Captain Anf Dec shouted, his voice on the edge of hysteria. "Where is the ship now?"

The ship lurched to one side as the crew struggled to reconcile the captain's contradictory orders. This lurch was followed by another blast that sent everyone on the bridge staggering.

"Krayn is off to our port, sir," one of the crew members said. "We've taken a blow to the fuel driver."

"What is he doing!" Captain Anf Dec shouted. "Doesn't he know who we are?"

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

"Yes, Captain. We informed the ship that we were a Colicoid ship with a Jedi observation team aboard. As per your instructions," the crew member added pointedly.

"Port-side deflector shield is down," another crew member shouted.

"What?" the captain asked, scuttling over to stare at the readout.

"How could that be?"

"We didn't get it fully operational in time — "

"Idiots!" Captain Anf Dec nearly fell over as another blast shook the ship. "It's an ambush — they must have reset the coordinates of our nav computer."

Anakin and Obi-Wan stared out the view port as the pirate ship shot into view. It was smaller than the Colicoid transport, but highly maneuverable. By the look of the orbital gun platforms and laser cannons, they were also vastly outgunned.

Because of his acute connection to the Force, Anakin knew his ability to read situations was far-ranging. He didn't need the Force now to tell him that with a failing ship and a panicked captain, they were in trouble.

If they couldn't outmaneuver Krayn or outrun him, what options were left?

He looked at his Master. When it came to strategic thinking, he depended on Obi-Wan. His Master could not only process all aspects of difficult situations, he could come up with several strategies and hone in on the best one — all within seconds.

"Our only hope is to get a small transport off this ship and infiltrate Krayn's ship," Obi-Wan said. "If we can get aboard, we could disable the weapons system."

"What's that?" The Colicoid captain turned his long head. "What did you say?"

"Will you authorize release of one of your transports to us?" Obi-Wan asked.

"What for?"

## Jude Watson

"To infiltrate Krayn's ship," Obi-Wan repeated. "It's the only way we'll escape destruction or capture."

"Do what you want. I don't care." Captain Anf Dec clutched the arms of his chair as the ship lurched from another blow. "Just do something!"

"We'll need you to create a diversion."

"Fine!"

Without another word, Obi-Wan turned and ran off the bridge. Anakin followed, his heart racing. He admired how his Master had sized up the situation and chosen a course of action within seconds. It was a daring move, but it could be their only hope.

They reached the cargo bay doors, where a number of small transports sat. They were used to ferry passengers or cargo to and from the surface while the large ship orbited a planet.

Obi-Wan stopped and turned to Anakin. "Choose."

Gratified by his Master's trust, Anakin turned to the ships. He surveyed them with a pilot's eye, but also drew in the Force to help with the decision. He needed to go on instinct now. He trusted that it would tell him the right ship to choose.

"The G-class shuttle," he said to Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan hesitated. "The lighter could be faster." Anakin grinned. "Not the way I fly."

Obi-Wan nodded. They ran toward the three-winged shuttle. Anakin activated the hatch and swung himself up into the cockpit. Obi-Wan followed.

Quickly, Anakin familiarized himself with the controls. There wasn't a ship made that he couldn't fly. He contacted the crew who operated the bay doors and quickly instructed them that they had Captain Anf Dec's permission to leave. After a moment, the doors opened slightly, and Anakin activated the two lower wings, which lifted into flight mode. They blasted off into space.

"There," Obi-Wan said after only a few seconds. "If you can keep near his exhaust, I think our ship is small enough to escape detection. Not to mention that Krayn has other things on his

mind." The Colicoid had kept his promise to create a diversion, flying erratically and letting off enough fire to keep Krayn occupied.

"And what should I do then?" Anakin asked.

"I'm open to suggestions," Obi-Wan answered.

But Anakin's mind was already working as soon as Obi-Wan said "exhaust." If they could hug the rear of the pirate ship, they might be able to slip into the exhaust system. The steam would overheat the craft, but if Anakin could push the ship fast enough, they might be able to make it into the interior.

Quickly, he described his plan to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan nodded. "It's possible. But the exhaust tunnels narrow as they travel inside the ship. We could be trapped."

"That's why this shuttle will come in handy," Anakin said. "I can retract the wings by degrees and use the third wing to fly."

Obi-Wan frowned. "That will give you less control."

Anakin nodded. "I know."

"And the heat will be intense in that shaft. The ship could overheat."

"Not if I speed." Anakin knew what Obi-Wan was thinking. He would have to pilot the ship fast enough to escape overheating, yet not so fast that he'd lose his maneuverability. "I think I can manage it."

"You think?"

"I *know*."

"Fine. Let's do it."

Krayn's ship had not spotted them, and Anakin was able to precisely mirror the pirate ship's quick attack maneuvers. By hugging Krayn's stern, he was able to escape detection. He anticipated which way the ship would move as it attacked again and again at the vulnerable parts of the Colicoid ship. He followed the ship like a shadow, all the time easing closer to the great exhaust valve at the stern.

The exhaust valve contained a huge whirring propeller. Anakin hung in the air, his fingers on the controls, timing the

## Jude Watson

propeller's turn. Obi-Wan remained silent, allowing Anakin to gather his concentration. The tiniest miscalculation could send them into the twirling blades.

Anakin knew the seconds were ticking away, and he appreciated Obi-Wan's silence. He waited until the Force gathered and united with his instincts and perceptions. He fixed his gaze on the spinning blades. They seemed to slow with the level of his concentration. As soon as he felt sure that he had fully absorbed the rhythm, he pushed the engines and felt the craft zoom toward the exhaust port. He flipped the shuttle sideways to slip through the blades.

The small craft shuddered from the wind created by the powerful blades, but it zoomed through an opening with only centimeters to spare.

Anakin kept his hands tight on the controls. Suddenly there was a blast of energy from the powerful exhaust. He was being pushed back into the blades again!

"Hold on!" he shouted.

He pushed the throttle forward, giving it all he had. A simple touch of the blade would send the ship spiraling out of control.

The engines kicked in. Anakin had to struggle to keep the ship steady.

They were speeding now — *too* fast. Within seconds, he saw that Obi-Wan had been correct. The shaft was narrowing. Soon there were only a few meters between the wings and the sides of the tunnel. Anakin quickly activated the wing controls so that the two side wings folded up toward the body of the ship. He felt the controls jump in his hands, but he held the ship firmly, slowing it down.

"I see light ahead," Obi-Wan murmured. Although Anakin knew there would be no censure in his Master's voice, he knew he'd cut it too close this time. Obi-Wan continued, "I'm betting we'll come out near the turbine in the power core. I hope there's room to land."

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

So did Anakin. The ship was now bumping with the fierce air currents, and he bent his will toward gentling it like a skittish bantha. Between the wing instability and the power of the exhaust, the ship was close to losing control.

But it wouldn't. He wouldn't allow it. He trusted in the ship's ability to take them where they needed to go.

He powered down the engines slightly as the shaft narrowed. They burst through the opening into the central power core. Anakin quickly avoided the giant turbines that sent energy blasts and steam down the shaft. If he landed directly in front of the exhaust shaft and turned off the engines, a good blast from the exhaust could send the ship back into the blades.

Instead he eased the shuttle craft down in the tiny space nearby. It was still close to the shaft, but the exhaust was not powerful enough to move the ship. He set the landing gear to lock.

Obi-Wan scanned the area. "Let's make for that catwalk. It will most likely lead to some sort of tech station. The ship is in attack mode, so the crew will be too busy to notice us. Let's hope so, anyway."

Anakin opened the hatch and they climbed down from the ship.

Immediately they were hit with a staggering blast of heat. Ignoring it, they ran lightly toward the catwalk. Accessing the Force, they leaped over the railing high above. Then they ran down the twisting metal walk past the giant generators.

The catwalk led to a small door that had a small wheel that served as a manual opening device. Obi-Wan quickly twisted the wheel one full revolution. His hand on his lightsaber hilt, he went through the door.

They were in a tech readout room for the power core. It was empty.

These readouts were backups, used only for emergencies. Obi-Wan proceeded to another door and accessed it. This time, they found themselves in a narrow, grimy hallway.

## Jude Watson

"We have to search for the weapons control tech center," Obi-Wan murmured. "It must be nearby. We can't expect it to be empty, however. On the contrary."

Anakin followed Obi-Wan down the hallway. Moving fast, they came to the end of the corridor. A window in the wide double door showed them the interior of a tech center. Obi-Wan motioned to Anakin to stay on one side of the door. He peered through the window. Everyone was too busy to notice him.

The center was staffed by tech droids. Since the weaponry was controlled at the bridge, the droids were merely monitoring the different systems.

"The droids are equipped with arm and chest blasters," he told Anakin.

"No doubt they are programmed to kill anyone who interferes with the control panels. We'll only have a few seconds before they register our presence as threatening. There are fourteen of them."

Anakin nodded. He withdrew his lightsaber. "Ready."

Obi-Wan opened the door and walked into the room, Anakin at his heels.

"Inspection," he announced.

A droid who was patrolling the others turned its rotating head.

"Authorization?"

Obi-Wan's lightsaber glowed. "Here."

He sprang forward, slicing toward the control panel. At the same time, Anakin moved to the left to take out the patrolling droid. He neatly sliced the head off the droid, which wobbled, arms waving, until he buried his lightsaber in its chest control panel. He felt a surge of satisfaction from the power of his new lightsaber. He wasn't in training mode anymore.

The other droids were quick. They swiveled in their stools and rose as one, blaster fire pinging from their chests and arms.

The blaster fire sang in Anakin's ears, random and close. The room was small and bare. There wasn't space to evade fire, and



## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

nowhere to hide. The two Jedi had to rely on their lightsabers only.

Anakin kept his lightsaber moving, trying to deflect fire as he moved forward. The perfect balance of the lightsaber helped his accuracy and speed. He kicked out with one leg and sent a droid flying, then somersaulted toward another, cleaving off one blaster arm and then slicing the droid in two. On his downswing, he demolished the droid on the floor for good. Turning, he went for the third droid.

Obi-Wan was a blur. He whirled, dived, leaped, and kicked, his lightsaber constantly moving. He held out a hand and the Force blasted a droid against the wall. Within seconds, he had demolished seven droids and turned to help Anakin reduce the last droid to a smoking heap on the floor.

"Now for the weapons system," he said.

"Do you know how to disable it?" Anakin asked.

Obi-Wan grinned. "Sure. I'll use a trick Qui-Gon taught me." He raised his lightsaber overhead and then slashed down onto the control panel. Smoke rose and metal sizzled. He aimed a second blow, then a third. Soon the control panel was completely demolished.

"That should do it. Let's go."

Anakin hurried after Obi-Wan. He knew they had only seconds before more droids arrived.

Obi-Wan started down the long hallway back toward the power core.

Anakin suddenly halted.

It didn't feel right to him to leave the ship. Krayn was here, within their grasp. They had a chance to annihilate a vicious slave trader who had imprisoned thousands and was responsible for the deaths of countless innocent beings.

How could they leave?

At the end of the corridor, Obi-Wan sensed that Anakin was not behind him. He turned. "What is it?"

## **Jude Watson**

"I can't leave." Anakin shook his head firmly. "We aren't finished. We have to destroy Krayn."

"That is not our mission, Anakin — "

Grimly, Anakin turned away. "It's mine."

He turned in the opposite direction from Obi-Wan and began to run.

## Chapter Eight

Shocked, Obi-Wan couldn't move for a moment. Anakin had caught him completely off balance. He hadn't seen this coming.

He should have.

Obi-Wan wheeled around and charged after his Padawan. Anakin had taken the corridor off the weapons tech center. The corridor was already empty as Obi-Wan raced down it. After a few steps it opened onto a hallway with four branches of corridors. Anakin wasn't visible down any of them.

Obi-Wan gritted his teeth in annoyance. Any moment now some sort of squad would check on those droids. As soon as they entered that readout room, they'd know that there were saboteurs aboard the ship. A general alarm would be issued. In the meantime, the Colicoid ship might be defeated. He had to find Anakin, and fast.

He reached out with the Force, searching the energy around him for Anakin. But the ship was too large and crammed with beings. Too much dark energy swirled around, acting like a veil between the Jedi. Not to mention that Anakin himself did not want to be found.

With nothing else to do, Obi-Wan took the first corridor on his right.

## Jude Watson

Obviously, the pirate Krayn did not care about cleanliness aboard his ship. While the Colicoid ship was cramped, it was relatively clean. Krayn's ship was littered with debris and the walls and floor were sticky with grime and oil. Whenever Obi-Wan heard footsteps he quickly ducked into one of the small cargo rooms that led off the corridors.

But time was running out, and he had to quicken his pace and rely on his lightsaber to get him out of trouble. Obi-Wan followed the corridor, being careful to keep his sense of direction. All the corridors seemed to twist around each other and intersect at the central point where he'd started. It was like searching a maze.

He was exploring the third corridor, running as fast as he dared, when he heard the unmistakable quick metallic steps of a troop of attack droids.

Obi-Wan had only seconds to decide whether to engage them or run. With Anakin still on the loose, he chose to double back and duck into the adjacent corridor.

But this one wasn't empty. It was full of pirates.

There were at least twenty of them. They were just as surprised as he was and fumbled for their weapons. Obi-Wan leaped forward, activating his lightsaber, ready for the first assault.

As the pirates registered his lightsaber, they seemed stunned. To Obi-Wan's surprise, a group in front slowly lowered their weapons. Every pirate in the room followed, laying his or her weapon on the floor.

One of the pirates stepped forward. Obi-Wan noted that his tunic was almost in rags.

"We are at your mercy, Jedi," he said.

Warily, Obi-Wan kept his lightsaber activated.

The pirate spoke in a hushed tone. "I am Condi, from the planet Zoraster. I am not a pirate. I am a slave. As are my companions. Stolen from our home worlds by Krayn. Under penalty of death, we have been assigned guard duty aboard the

ship." Condi looked at him eagerly. "Thank the moons and stars, we have rescue in our grasp at last."

Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber. The naked desperation on Condi's face unnerved him. It was mirrored in the faces of his companions. All of them had obviously suffered great deprivations.

"I am sorry," he said. "I have not come on a rescue mission."

Condi's face fell, then brightened. "But you can take us with you. We will help you fight."

"I cannot." Obi-Wan felt these two words were the most difficult he had ever said. "I have only a small ship, big enough for me and my companion." He wanted to promise them he would return, but how could he make that promise? If he got off the ship safely with Anakin, Krayn would be gone. The ship could hide anywhere in the galaxy. He believed too strongly in a Jedi promise to make one he did not know if he could fulfill.

Someone spoke from the back. "So you leave us here, like this?"

Obi-Wan did not know how to answer. "I will do my best to help you,"

he finally said. "But not here. Not now. In order to help you, I must get off this ship."

Condi swallowed. "Then we will help you."

"No." Obi-Wan shook his head firmly. "That I will not allow. It will put you in danger. The best thing we can do for each other is part ways here."

Condi's face was full of anguish, but he nodded with dignity. "We have never seen you, Jedi."

"Thank you." Obi-Wan caught a flicker of movement at the end of the corridor. Anakin!

He raced through the slaves and toward his Padawan. Anakin saw him and stopped. He knew better than to run.

Obi-Wan came up. "Anakin, I have no time to argue with you. We must go."

## Jude Watson

"There are patrols everywhere," Anakin told him. "I can't find Krayn."

"Our best chance to destroy this operation is to leave this ship at once," Obi-Wan told him urgently.

"But he's here, now!" Anakin argued. "We can destroy him."

"Marking a being for death is not the Jedi way," Obi-Wan told him severely.

"Even when that being enslaves others, kills them as if they were nothing, imprisons them against their will?" Anakin argued. "I heard the slaves beg you to help them. I saw you turn your back on them. How can you abandon them to such misery? Every day for a slave is another chance to die. Killing Krayn will free them. How can you do this?"

"Anakin, you must be logical," Obi-Wan said, struggling to hold on to his composure. "How can I help them? If we want to bring down Krayn's empire, we must have a plan. We can't just sneak aboard his ship and hope to run into him."

"It seems as good a plan as any."

"It's not. And it could result in our deaths, and the deaths of many."

If one miscalculation or mistake on our part occurs, Krayn will take his revenge on those he controls — the slaves. Our best plan is to leave now and get the Council to pledge their resources to bring down Krayn. There will be no more arguments here. Time is running out. Guards are most likely searching for us now, and I don't think the Colicoids will wait for our return much longer. Now come. You must understand that this is the best way."

"You're the one who doesn't understand!" Anakin shouted.

Obi-Wan was startled at Anakin's vehemence, but he kept his gaze on him, willing him to obey.

Anakin hesitated. He cast his eyes down sullenly. He would not disobey a direct order. Reluctantly, he nodded. Obi-Wan could tell that fury and frustration boiled within him.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

They would need time to sort this out. Time they would have back aboard the Colicoid ship.

Obi-Wan did not have to turn and check to make sure that Anakin was behind him. He felt his furious resentment all the way back to the central power core. They did not meet any droid patrols and were able to sneak inside the power core once again. They hurried down the catwalk, running now.

Obi-Wan ducked under their transport, released the hatch, and climbed inside. He strapped himself into the pilot seat and signaled Anakin through the view port to follow.

Anakin began to duck underneath the rim of the ship. Suddenly, blaster fire peppered the side of the ship near his head. Anakin ducked to the ground.

A pirate leaped off the catwalk, blasters in both hands. He looked human, and Obi-Wan fleetingly wondered how he could jump such a distance.

The pirate landed just a few feet from Anakin. He kept his blasters level but did not shoot again. His short hair was braided and studded with sharp glittering objects woven through the twisted strands. Various lethal weapons hung from his thick utility belt. He looked strong, but he wasn't very large.

Suddenly Obi-Wan realized that the pirate was a woman. Then familiar blue eyes flashed, and shock shimmered inside him.

This wasn't just a woman. The pirate was Siri.

## Chapter Nine

Siri no longer looked like a Jedi. She was dressed in a tunic and leggings fashioned from various skins. Blast padding covered her shoulders and chest. On her pale cheeks were red scars that on closer inspection he realized were facial markings designed to give her a fierce appearance. Her bright blond hair was darkened with some kind of grease. Obi-Wan was shocked by her savage appearance.

Yet he had to trust that she would not fire on Anakin.

"Anakin, get in," he called.

Anakin eyed Siri's blasters.

"You won't shoot him, Siri," Obi-Wan said.

"I am Siri no longer," Siri answered. "I am Zora."

"There is still Jedi in you," Obi-Wan said, "even though you have betrayed every part of our code."

"There are so many things I do not miss about the Jedi," Siri said thoughtfully, blocking Anakin from the ship. "One is their self-righteousness. It's so boring."

Anakin gazed from Obi-Wan back to Siri, amazement on his face.

"Zora!" A huge, bellowing voice filled the space. "Did you find the intruders?"

"Krayn," Anakin said, even though no one was in sight yet.



"Get in!" Obi-Wan hissed.

"Zora!" The bellow was loud and close.

Siri sprang forward. With one sweeping motion, she closed the hatch, separating Anakin from Obi-Wan. Then she spun sideways toward the giant turbines. She accessed the control panel and pressed several buttons. The giant turbines began to spin faster.

Obi-Wan guessed her strategy a few seconds too late. He just had time to grab the controls when the turbines roared to life at three times their normal speed. A gust of wind picked the craft up like a feather and hurled it toward the shaft.

Fighting for control, Obi-Wan struggled to hold the ship steady. It crashed against one wall of the shaft, then smashed against the other side.

He quickly opened the side wings slightly for more control. It wasn't easy to prevent the ship from crashing and burning in the narrow shaft, but he managed to keep it heading down the middle as it lurched.

The turning propellers ahead reminded him that he could be cut to bits. Obi-Wan drew on the Force, concentrating all his will on the task ahead. Time seemed to slow as he gauged his own speed and the speed of the powerful rotors. At the last possible second, he activated the wings fully and flipped sideways. As the ship slipped through the rotors, one of them clipped a wing. Spiraling crazily, the ship shot out into space.

Obi-Wan fought for control. He activated the third wing to take up some of the control he had lost. The ship slowly steadied beneath his hands. He cut back the engines and spun the craft around. Should he follow the ship, or attempt another landing inside the exhaust shaft? He asked himself the question, but he knew the ship did not have the control necessary to navigate that shaft again.

He couldn't leave Anakin to be captured by Siri and Krayn. He could not allow his Padawan to become a slave once again.

## **Jude Watson**

Then as he watched, Krayn's ship blasted into hyperspace in a shower of light energy.

He could not follow. His Padawan was gone.

## Chapter Ten

Everything had happened so fast. It was rare for Anakin to be caught by surprise. One moment he had been furious at Obi-Wan but ready to board the ship, and the next moment his Master was being blasted down the shaft.

His Jedi reflexes still needed honing. Siri-Zora had completely turned the situation around while he was still absorbing what was happening.

Krayn appeared on the catwalk above.

Krayn was humanoid, but had the size and heft of a natural formation, a boulder, a tree. His body seemed carved out of rock. His shaved head glinted in the dim light. As he drew closer Anakin could see various items hanging from the double utility belt he had slung around his waist. They swung with the motion of his walk. He clutched a vibro-ax in one meaty fist, and his small, glittering eyes swept the scene before him with shrewdness.

A huge Wookiee stood by his side. Anakin realized this must be Rashtah. Ammunition belts crisscrossed his hairy body and a row of blasters were strapped to his waist. A jagged scar began under the hair of his scalp and traveled through his eye down to his lip. An eye patch covered that eye, hiding the damage.

## Jude Watson

Rashtah waved his vibrosword at Siri and sent his own bellow of greeting.

Siri reached over and powered down the turbines. Anakin wondered what his best move would be. There was no game plan for this particular situation. Would the Siri part of Zora cover for him, or would the heartless-seeming Zora give him up immediately? She had certainly acted ruthlessly in the case of Obi-Wan.

His instincts flared. *Stay silent. Let her speak.*

So Anakin said nothing as Krayn stomped toward them, the vibro-ax twirling like a child's toy in his other hand.

"What's this? Have you caught our intruder?"

"No. This is nobody, just a slave," Siri said. "I grabbed him as a shield just in case, but he wasn't needed. I'm afraid our intruders took the exhaust tunnel back into space."

"If they made it." Krayn's dark eyes glittered. "I gave the order to jump to hyperspace. If they were in the shaft when that happened, they're space dust."

The Wookiee gave a sound of amusement.

"That would be a bonus," Siri said. Her eyes glinted with the same cruelty as Krayn's.

*She hates Obi-Wan*, Anakin realized.

Krayn stuck his head closer to the exhaust shaft. "We'll have to figure out a way to block this from airships. Don't want to be surprised again. Heads will roll about this one."

While Krayn's back was to them and Rashtah was distracted, Siri reached over and deftly removed Anakin's lightsaber from his utility belt.

Again, she had been quicker than his perception. She did it so quickly and smoothly that he barely registered that he had been disarmed. She thrust the lightsaber inside her tunic in the same smooth motion.

Krayn turned and gave his full attention to Anakin. Anakin met his gaze squarely. He could imagine that Krayn's gaze had

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

the power to terrify, but it did not work on him. He was curious and contemptuous, not scared.

"What are you looking at, slave?" Krayn suddenly bellowed, his voice full of rage.

Anakin realized too late that slaves did not look directly at their masters. He had never been particularly good at submissive poses, anyway.

Siri lashed out with one leg, twisting it around his so that he was forced to stumble.

"Show some respect," she hissed.

Anakin gave her a look of pure loathing, but Krayn could not see it.

He kept his eyes at mid-level when he turned back to Krayn.

"He looks strong," Krayn said, stroking his neatly trimmed black beard. "Should fetch a good price on Nar Shaddaa."

Now that his gaze was mid-level, Anakin realized that the objects dangling from Krayn's belt were talismans. They were objects Anakin didn't want to think about, for some of them resembled dried flesh and he could pick out bits of hair. There were jewels and crystals as well, and a small silver bell...

The silver bell. Anakin's gaze was riveted on it. He knew it. He recognized it. It was the bell that Amee's mother had worn around her neck.

Suddenly Krayn's meaty hand reached down and jangled some of the hanging items. The bell tinkled softly, and a strange pain seared Anakin's heart.

"Admiring my kill trophies?" Krayn asked him in a low, cunning tone.

"Or do you think you might snatch a jewel or two? Think again, slave. One of your fingers or your scalp will end up hanging alongside them!"

He laughed, and Siri and Rashtah joined him. As Krayn shook with amusement, Anakin heard the tinkling of the bell. So Hala was dead. The sweet sound of the bell mingled with Krayn's harsh laughter until Anakin's vision blurred with rage. He could

## Jude Watson

kill him, right here, right now. He would not need his light-saber. He could do it with his bare hands....

"I'd better get the slaves ready for departure," Siri said. "We'll be at Nar Shaddaa soon. Come, slave."

She prodded Anakin with the butt of her electrojabber. "Might as well enjoy the ship while you can. Soon you'll be working in the spice mines."

"For the rest of your life," Krayn added, still laughing. Anakin felt his feet move as Siri prodded him again, this time more sharply. Krayn had not frightened him. Siri had not frightened him. The fact that he was alone had not frightened him.

But soon he would be sold again into slavery. He knew firsthand how hard it was for a slave to escape. He had heard tales of the spice mines and the mortality rate of the workers there. He knew how dreams of escape would color his days. He knew how one gray day would follow one gray day, where he would not lift his head but keep it bowed to work. He knew that the dull drudgery of his days would fill his soul until the dreams of escape flattened into a haze of numbing routine.

He thought he had faced his worst fear in the cave on Ilum. He had not. He realized now that he had just begun to taste it.

## Chapter Eleven

Obi-Wan knew that it was useless for him to replay the situation, but he knew that if he had reacted faster, had jumped off the ship to confront Siri, he would not be in this position. His shock had slowed his reflexes.

If Siri had been an ordinary enemy, he would not have been frozen in that pilot seat. If he had not remembered what she had been when she'd been his friend, he would not have imagined that she was capable of blasting him off the ship and taking Anakin as her captive.

Obi-Wan paced back and forth on the bridge of the Colicoid ship. He knew he was lucky to be there at all. He doubted the Colicoids would have waited for him if their own ship had not been damaged.

Captain Anf Dec had not bothered to hide the fact that he now considered the Jedi a nuisance. He did not even thank Obi-Wan for dismantling the weapons system of Krayn's ship, but indicated that it was the least the Jedi could do. Obi-Wan sensed that the captain was nervous about the reaction of his superiors to the mission. The Colicoids did not allow failure in their higher personnel.

He knew it was fruitless to track a ship through hyperspace, but he had demanded that the Colicoid communication system

## Jude Watson

search the galaxy for possible exit vectors for Krayn's ship. He had to pressure Anf Dec with the full weight of the Senate and the Jedi Council before the captain agreed.

Of course the odds were stacked against him. A pirate ship did not register with host planets. If it needed repairs or supplies it went to a number of spaceports willing to make a few credits by catering to illegals, or simply captured a nearby unlucky vessel for parts or fuel.

Maybe, Obi-Wan thought, that was why Krayn had attacked them in the first place. Perhaps it was a simple mistake. If that were the case, Krayn was in need of fuel or supplies, and could be heading to the nearest spaceport that would accommodate an illegal.

So far the Colicoid search had turned up nothing.

But did Krayn make mistakes? Obi-Wan kept circling back to that question. From everything he'd read and seen in Krayn's data file, the pirate had managed to survive and thrive when his fellow criminals died in strategic miscalculations, private battles, and ill-judged alliances. Krayn was a despicable life-form, but he had intelligence and cunning.

Obi-Wan stopped pacing. He was allowing his worry over Anakin and disgust at himself to agitate him. When the body was agitated, the mind was as well. He went still. He breathed. He found the place inside himself that knew second-guessing was a waste of time. He had done his best, made the calculations that he could. Any more recriminations would only slow him down.

As he reached into himself, Qui-Gon's words floated to the surface.

His Master had often said them when they had reached what appeared to be a dead end in a mission.

*Let's look at the who. That will lead us to the why.*

He found his gaze resting on Captain Anf Dec. The captain's determined unfriendliness did not bother him. But other things did. As Obi-Wan tapped his instincts, he also uncovered a memory. He recalled his unease with Captain Dec's behavior



from the first meeting with him aboard ship. The captain did not seem a bit worried about the possibility of Krayn attacking. That was strange, considering the Colicoids had accepted Jedi help.

Obi-Wan returned to the moment Krayn had first attacked the ship.

There had been something in Anf Dec's manner that had bothered him then, too.

Obi-Wan focused on the memory, calling up details. He and Anakin had rushed to the bridge. The captain had given a flurry of orders. He had given every indication of being close to panic. Colicoids were unemotional beings. They were trained and held to a standard of reserve. Captain Anf Dec's obvious fear was an unusual display.

It wasn't his fear that troubled Obi-Wan, however. It was his outrage.

That was what had flustered the captain — he had been caught by surprise.

He seemed to take the attack personally.

But why? The Colicoids had enlisted the Jedi because they knew Krayn's attack was a possibility.

Or had they? Obi-Wan recalled that Chancellor Palpatine had been at the meeting. That was unusual. What it could indicate was that the Colicoids had been pressured to accept the Jedi. The Colicoids hadn't wanted them along not because they were wary of strangers, but because...

Because... Why?

He didn't have the answer. But when he found it, Obi-Wan knew that it would lead him to his Padawan.

The Colicoid ship limped into one of the busy orbiting spaceports of Coruscant. Obi-Wan had already briefed Yoda and the Council by holographic transmission. He did not need to check in with the Temple. He took an air taxi to the Senate neighborhood below.

There, he hurried down the walkway opposite the grand Senate complex.

## Jude Watson

He turned a corner and smiled when he saw a cheerful cafe painted blue with yellow shutters. The sign read DIDI AND ASTRI'S CAFE..

Didi and his daughter Astri had been good friends of Qui-Gon. Years ago Qui-Gon had volunteered to help Didi out of a "small difficulty" that had turned into a major mission involving the health and safety of an entire planet. Didi had survived a severe blaster wound and had gone on to become a successful cafe owner with his daughter. He no longer trafficked in stolen information, but he was still friends with the Jedi, and he kept his ears open.

Obi-Wan pushed open the door, remembering his first sight of the cafe thirteen years before. It had been cluttered, crowded, and dirty. Didi had reigned over the chaotic cafe with good cheer and a paternal way with his customers, but he'd never managed to keep the tables very clean or the food very nourishing. It was Astri who had transformed the cafe into a thriving restaurant with good food. Their clientele had slowly changed. Smugglers and criminals still ate here, but now they were joined by Senators and diplomats.

Obi-Wan stood for a moment, gazing over the heads of the customers to see if he could spot Didi or Astri. It had been nearly a year since he'd had the chance to visit them. They had both taken the news of Qui-Gon's death hard.

A tall woman a little older than Obi-Wan stood by a table, chatting with two customers who wore the robes of Senatorial aides. The woman's springy dark hair spilled out from underneath a white cap, and her white apron was stained with various colors. As she motioned to the aides, she nearly knocked over the teapot. Despite his anxiety, Obi-Wan grinned. Astri hadn't changed.

She looked up and her gaze met his. Astri's pretty face bloomed into a wide smile.

"Obi-Wan!" She rushed toward him, knocking over a chair in her haste to greet him. She threw herself into his arms. Obi-Wan

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

hugged her, feeling her curls brush his cheeks. He had once felt awkward at such displays of emotion. Not anymore. Qui-Gon had taught him by example. Obi-Wan remembered how surprised he'd been as a Padawan to see Qui-Gon enthusiastically hug Didi.

She drew back. "Are you hungry? I have delicious stew today."

He shook his head. "I need help."

Her dancing eyes turned grave. "Let's find Didi."

A small, rotund man was already heading for them, his soft brown eyes widened in pleasure. He, too, enveloped Obi-Wan in a huge hug, though he barely reached Obi-Wan's shoulders. "How my eyes delight me!" he burred.

"The brave and wise Obi-Wan Kenobi, my good friend to whom I owe my life and my daughter!"

"Obi-Wan needs our help, Didi," Astri interrupted, for Didi would have gone on with flattery and sentiment.

Didi nodded. "Then come to the private office."

Obi-Wan followed Didi and Astri to a small, messy office behind the long counter. Although the cafe had improved significantly since Astri had taken over, the office was still a jumble of fading datasheets, mismatched plates, stacks of fresh tablecloths, and half-filled teacups.

"What can we do for you, my friend?" Didi asked. "Inadequate as I am, I am in your service."

"I'm searching for information only," Obi-Wan said. "Perhaps if you do not have answers, you could direct me to the party who does. I am investigating possible ties between a slave trader named Krayn and the Colicoids."

Didi frowned, and Astri wrinkled her nose.

"I don't like the Colicoid senators," she said. "Nothing is ever good enough for them."

"I have heard of Krayn," Didi said. "The galaxy would be well rid of such a fiend. I know of no connection, but.."

## Jude Watson

Obi-Wan waited. He knew that Didi was running over his vast list of contacts in his mind.

"Try Gogol at the Dor," Didi said at last. "I won't let him in this place since I found out what he traffics in. He did some work for Krayn, I heard."

"The Dor? I don't know it," Obi-Wan said.

"Of course you do," Astri said. "The Splendor. The readout letters kept getting shot off by stray blaster fire, so they finally gave up replacing them. Now everyone calls it the Dor." Astri shuddered. "Not that I'd set foot in the place."

Didi looked anxious. "You must be careful of your person, Obi-Wan.

Gogol has mean bones."

He gave Obi-Wan a quick description, and Obi-Wan was treated to two more fierce hugs from Didi and Astri. Promising to return for a meal, he hurried from the cafe.

He had been to the Splendor with Qui-Gon several times. He had come to know sections of the hidden city below the gleaming surface levels of Coruscant, where sunlight did not reach. Here, the walkways were narrow and littered, the twisting alleyways dangerous, and all of it barely lit by glow lamps that were constantly shot out and not replaced. Here was where one found the dregs of the galaxy, the worst criminals and lowlifes, where one could bargain cheaply for a death mark on an enemy's head.

The sleazy Splendor hadn't changed. The metal roof sagged, and the windows were ominously shuttered. The door was pockmarked with blaster fire. The letters ID 0 R sputtered faintly in the dim light. Years ago as a Padawan, Obi-Wan had entered it nervous and unsure. Now he strode in as if he owned it.

It was not the same Imbat bartender at the bar, but it might well have been. He projected the same indifference to his customers, the same penchant for swatting his customers off their stools with a massive palm for trying too vigorously to signal for a refill.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

Obi-Wan stood at the corner of the bar and waited.

He knew better than to signal for the Imbat's attention. Eventually the Imbat wandered over and bent his tall frame closer to hear Obi-Wan over the noise of the music and the whirl of the jubilee wheel.

"Gogol," Obi-Wan told him.

The Imbat signaled a table with his eyes. Obi-Wan slid a few credits across the bar.

Gogol was just as Didi had described him, a humanoid with a half-shaved head and long hair that straggled down his back. He played a dice game by himself, and bets were piled at both ends of his small table.

Obi-Wan sat across from him and said nothing. Gogol did not look up from his game. "What do you want, chum?"

Obi-Wan slid a pack of credits across the table. "Information on Krayn."

Gogol eyed the packet without touching it. "Then I'll need to see more than that."

Obi-Wan slid another packet of credits into the middle of the table.

Gogol counted the two packets.

"I want to know what he's up to these days," Obi-Wan said.

"That's a tall order, chum." Gogol looked up. His beady eyes blinked rapidly. "Nobody knows the whole answer to that question."

"Give me part of it, then. Does he have any dealings with the Colicoids?"

"The table looks awfully empty," Gogol said. Obi-Wan peeled off a few more credits.

Gogol licked his fingers in satisfaction as he counted the credits.

Obi-Wan profoundly hoped that he was trustworthy, at least as far as information. Most types such as Gogol knew better than to lie. That would only get them in more trouble than they no doubt were in already.

## Jude Watson

"Word is that the Colicoids are taking over the spice trade," Gogol said. "They have secretly taken over the Kessel mines. Now they need a big processing planet. The last piece is the moon of Nar Shaddaa. The only way they can get it is to deal with Krayn. He controls the factories on Nar Shaddaa. He can't get enough spice from the caverns there, so he imports it from Kessel. It's a marriage made in paradise," Gogol cackled.

Obi-Wan knew Nar Shaddaa. Often called "smuggler's moon," it was a haven for criminals of all sorts. It was also an important link in the illegal spice trade. He had not known that Krayn was involved, however.

"Aga Culpa is the ruler of Nar Shaddaa. Doesn't he control the factories?" he asked.

"He might rule it, but he doesn't control it. Everyone on Nar Shaddaa answers to Krayn. So Krayn promises not to attack the Colicoid ships, and they promise to buy his slaves for the spice mines and use his factories. A good deal, eh, chum?"

A very good deal, Obi-Wan thought heavily, if one overlooked the fact that it involved cruelty, greed, and the selling of living beings for profit.

He stood and quickly exited the Dor. He paused outside for a moment.

It had started to rain, and he welcomed the coolness on his cheeks.

The mention of the spice trade had immediately sparked a memory. He knew that Adi Gallia and Siri's last mission together had involved the smuggling activities on the Kessel Run. Spice was a legally controlled substance, but it also held enormous profits on the black market. The Jedi had been asked to try to break the back of the illegal trade once and for all. Adi Gallia and Siri had not been successful. Something had happened on the mission that had caused a deep rift between them.

Could this be connected to the Colicoids... and Krayn?

## **STAR WARS: Path to Truth**

Obi-Wan began to walk in search of an air taxi. When he was unsure of which direction to go in next, his thoughts always returned to his Master.

He remembered Qui-Gon's counsel, counsel Obi-Wan had passed on to Anakin about trusting his instincts and not allowing anger to cloud judgment. He should have listened to his heart.

Now his heart told him a simple truth. Siri would never betray the Jedi.

## Chapter Twelve

Once again, Obi-Wan stood before the Jedi Council. It was just about the last place he wanted to be. He had lost his Padawan, who had been captured by a slave trader. The Colicoids were furious at the Jedi and had already raised objections in the Senate. He did not imagine that the Jedi Council was pleased with the outcome of his mission.

He wasted no time in trying to explain what had gone wrong. Jedi always focused on solutions.

"I have discovered that it is likely that the Colicoids are secretly in league with Krayn," Obi-Wan said immediately after greeting the Council members respectfully. "They wish to take over the spice trade, and Krayn wishes to be the sole supplier of slaves for the spice mines, both in the Kessel system and at Nar Shaddaa."

Some on the Council exchanged glances. If this were true, the illegal spice trade would thrive and grow.

"Bad news this is for the galaxy," Yoda remarked.

"We have reason to investigate what is happening on Nar Shaddaa, both to expose the Colicoids and bring down Krayn," Obi-Wan said. "And most important, I believe Anakin is on Nar Shaddaa. My guess is that the Colicoids were heading there after dropping us off at the original location."



## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

"What is it you want of us, Obi-Wan?" Mace Windu asked, his dark eyes fixed on Obi-Wan's face.

"A very fast ship and permission to infiltrate Krayn's operation,"

Obi-Wan answered. "That is first of all. But second, and most important, I wish to be let in on a secret." He turned to Adi Gallia. "I believe that Siri has not turned to the dark side. I believe she is working undercover.

If I infiltrate Krayn's operation, I need to know her mission."

Adi Gallia's regal face was impassive. Then she flicked a quick glance at Yoda and Mace Windu.

Slowly, Yoda nodded. "Correct you are, Obi-Wan."

"Siri is gathering information only," Adi Gallia said. "We discovered that the layers of power and control between Krayn and various governments are deep. We needed a full picture. Siri infiltrated the pirates and worked her way up to a position of trust.

Krayn has no idea she is a Jedi. It is well known that he considers all Jedi his enemies and all his crew are ordered to execute any captured Jedi on the spot. It has taken Siri almost two years to gain this level of power in the Krayn organization. We cannot jeopardize her safety."

"But Anakin is with her — "

"Then she will protect him," Adi Gallia said firmly. "I am not sure if sending another Jedi is wise. It could compromise her identity."

"Perhaps," Mace Windu said. "But perhaps we have waited long enough.

If the Colicoids are involved, that intensifies the pressure to bring about the collapse of the spice trade."

"I am worried about Anakin," Obi-Wan said. "There is only one way Siri can protect him. She must make him a slave. I do not know how he will react to that."

"Assume we do that he will act like a Jedi," Yoda said sharply, his gray-blue eyes blinking at Obi-Wan. "Patience he will find."

## Jude Watson

Obi-Wan could not argue without it reflecting badly on Anakin. But he knew that patience was not his Padawan's strong suit.

"Siri has sent us a coded message, Obi-Wan," Mace Windu said. "If you had not come to us, we would have sent for you. Anakin is safe. He is indeed a slave in a spice factory on Nar Shaddaa. She is keeping an eye on him."

"I must go there," Obi-Wan said.

"Patience you must have as well, Obi-Wan," Yoda said. "Confer with Adi Gallia we must."

"Please wait outside, Obi-Wan," Mace Windu said firmly.

Reluctantly, Obi-Wan left the room. He was too restless to sit in the waiting area outside the Council Room so he stood facing the door.

He had spoken bitterly to Siri aboard Krayn's ship. He regretted it now. He should have paid attention to what he had come to know about her over the years. He should have remembered how impressed he'd always been with her integrity and courage, her fierce commitment to the Jedi path.

Instead he had spoken words of anger and betrayal.

And now Siri was the only thing standing between Anakin and survival.

He did not have long to wait. In just a few minutes, Adi Gallia slipped out of the Council Room.

"We have decided to grant your request. You can join Siri on Nar Shaddaa," Adi Gallia told him. He saw a rare crack in her regal bearing as she hesitantly put out a hand toward him, then withdrew it. "I know you will be careful, Obi-Wan, so I should not say it. But I must. Siri is in great danger. She has risked much. Please..."

Adi Gallia was a reserved and careful being. She did not ask for comfort and usually kept herself aloof. But Obi-Wan was moved by her distress and reacted spontaneously. He captured her hand and pressed it between his palms. "I will not fail you," he said.

## Chapter Thirteen

The siren blared, then clanged, announcing the start of another day. A day like yesterday. A day like tomorrow. If you survived it.

He had been here only five days, and it felt like a lifetime.

*It could be far, far worse for us, Annie.*

He understood Shmi's words now with every cell of his being. Compared to this, working for Watto on Tatooine had been a paradise.

The factories on Nar Shaddaa rose hundreds of stories and were spread out over hundreds of meters. The spice went through a multistep processing system. It could not be exposed to light, so the slaves lived in perpetual darkness. Much of the spice was off-loaded from ships that had made the Kessel Run. Other spice was cut in huge underground caverns. All of it was ferried up to the processing levels where the spice was dried or frozen, then processed into blocks.

Enormous power plants supplied energy for the endeavor. At the end of the long day, the workers filed out from the darkness, almost blinded, only to walk under a sky thick with toxic fumes. Taking a deep breath of the gray, particulate-laden air could lead to a long coughing fit.

## Jude Watson

Anakin already knew that the death rate among slaves was high.

Children and the elders were especially vulnerable. From what he could see, many were dying by degrees.

Security was constant. The slaves were guarded by patrolling natives of Nar Shaddaa as well as droids. Escape was impossible. Even if one could manage to elude the guards and security devices, there would be nowhere to hide. The native citizens of Nar Shaddaa benefited from the slave trade. If they dissented, they were either threatened or bought off with huge bribes.

The spaceports of this moon world were tightly controlled by Krayn. There was no way to break out and nowhere to go.

The whole operation ran incredibly smoothly, Anakin thought in disgust. Greed did not make Krayn sloppy.

Anakin had been assigned to gravsled duty. It was his job to transport the cut spice up to the processing levels. It was tedious, filthy work, much of it spent breathing in the dirt and dust from the caverns as he loaded the gravsled. Anakin was not aware of the fact that his job was considered lucky until he accidentally almost ran down a processing worker.

The slave, a female Twi'lek, had stepped back un-expectedly from her position at the loading dock, right into the path of his gravsled. Only Anakin's excellent reflexes prevented him from ramming her.

She whirled, her long head tails almost slapping Anakin in the face.

"Watch where you're going, *schutta*."

Anakin didn't know what a *schutta* was, but he knew when he was being insulted. "You're the one who stepped back," he pointed out. It was close to the end of a long day, and his mind and muscles were strained to the limit.

She advanced on him angrily, her blue skin flushed to a deeper hue.

"Don't tangle with me, soft boy. Your privileges don't count around here."

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

"Quiet!" A slave on the assembly line warned them in a hiss. "Guard droid."

Anakin saw a droid with an electrojabber wheeling down the aisle at a quick pace. A red beam shot out from the guard's chest and circled. This was how the droids kept track of each slave.

"It's looking for me," the Twi'lek said. "We can't leave the line, even for a moment." Her defiance was gone, and she sounded scared.

The slaves on the line immediately closed up so that the space where the Twi'lek had stood was gone. Anakin reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Hop on."

She did as he said, and he reversed the gravsled and took off down another aisle.

"Crouch down underneath those bins," he murmured. "I'll look busy until it goes away."

"We all look alike to those droids," the Twi'lek muttered. "If I can slip back in place before it starts a head count, I might get away with this. Otherwise it's a prod or two with the electrojabber."

"Don't worry." Anakin gritted his teeth. On his first day, he had seen such an assault, on a slave too exhausted to work quickly. The guard droids were programmed to be especially vicious. They did not use "a prod or two,"

but employed the jabber until the victim was stunned into unconsciousness.

Anakin sped down the narrow lanes, occasionally stopping to unload a bin of spice so that he wouldn't look suspicious. He didn't want to leave the floor. The head count could begin at anytime, and he needed to be able to sneak the Twi'lek back in. Soon he would be in trouble himself. He was allowed a strict amount of time for his rounds.

He circled around the processing floor and returned to where he had a good vantage point. The guard droid was beginning a head count.

## Jude Watson

He heard a soft moan from behind him. "I'm dead."

"No, you're not." Anakin was not yet adept at moving objects with his mind. Yet he knew the Force was around him, even here. He drew it up from the scarred ground below, from the living energy of the beings around him, from the toxic sky. The Force bound all the slaves together, and they were part of one another and the rest of the galaxy, no matter how isolated they might feel. He struggled to block out everything but the pure quality of the Force. Slowly, he felt the Force grow around him, and he gathered it in and then sent it out to a pile of unprocessed spice sitting on the end of the worker line. One block of spice trembled, then another. Anakin held out a hand, feeling the Force move through him. The pile tumbled over, along with a stack of durasteel bins.

The guard droid immediately wheeled about. "Violation! Violation!"

"Go!" Anakin hissed.

The Twi'lek paused for one instant. Her eyes met his, and he saw a kind of forgiveness there. "My name is Mazie." Offering her name was a kind of apology, a gesture of friendship, he knew.

"Anakin."

She scooted out of the gravsled. The other slaves bunched up, shielding her for the few seconds it took her to slip back in line.

Anakin turned the gravsled. The guard droid could blame no one for the accident, since no one had been near. It circled, aiming its red laser light randomly, but the slaves continued to work. After a few seconds it went back to the head count. Mazie was safe.

Anakin was grateful for the hard physical training he'd been put through at the Temple. The slaves were rationed two scanty meals a day. He felt constant hunger like a beast inside him. He was not yet at Obi-Wan's level, capable of forgetting about food for long periods of time. He had to use meditation to allow his hunger to exist without weakening him.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

As he parked his gravsled at the end of the day and headed for the lift tubes with the other slaves, he felt a deep weariness in his bones. He knew it had to do with a weariness of spirit as well.

Obi-Wan was looking for him. That he knew. He was also confident that his Master would find him. But how long would it take? How much of him would be chipped away before it happened? Swallowing rage and fear did not fill up his empty belly, but it made him worry about losing his Jedi detachment.

He kept his eyes on the slave in front of him as they trudged to their quarters. A rain was falling, and it tasted bitter and metallic on Anakin's lips. He felt it soak his hair and unsuit.

Suddenly he felt a surge in the Force. Startled and hopeful, he lifted his head. Was his Master near? He searched the platforms high above. The factories and slave quarters were on the surface of Nar Shaddaa, but the city was built above. He did not see his Master. Instead, he saw Krayn.

The pirate stood on a platform a hundred meters high. Standing next to him was a nervous human man who Anakin did not know. Siri stood on Krayn's other side. Strange, but Siri's gaze seemed to focus right in on Anakin. He felt the Force gather, and he did not understand it. Did he have a connection to Siri? He didn't know. Was she demonstrating that she still could utilize her Jedi abilities? Maybe it was a warning. He didn't care.

He was about to drop his gaze when another being joined the others on the platform. Anakin was surprised to see the Colicoid captain, Anf Dec.

What was he doing there? Weren't Krayn and the Colicoids bitter enemies?

After all, Krayn had attacked Anf Dec's ship!

Krayn pointed below and made a sweeping gesture. Anf Dec nodded. Siri stared serenely ahead, no longer focused on Anakin.

He didn't know what it all meant. But somehow, he resolved to find out.

## Chapter Fourteen

Obi-Wan adjusted his blast pads and helmet. Then he checked to make sure his lightsaber was hidden among the jumble of weapons on his belt. He was disguised as a slave trader named Bakleeda, and he hoped he would pass.

When he had gathered his concentration, he strode down the deserted corridor toward Security Room A.

It had taken careful planning to get him this far. He was on the space station Rorak 5, a half day's journey from Nar Shaddaa. It existed as a fuel stop for traveling freighters and was also well known for having a suite of security rooms available for meetings, clandestine or otherwise.

The security rooms were outfitted with the highest defenses, and it was possible for all parties to leave their ships and travel there without being seen. As soon as Obi-Wan landed, a moving corridor attached to his landing ramp. He exited his ship and followed a set of verbal directions from overhead speakers to his destination.

Security Room A was where Krayn and the Colicoids were secretly meeting to discuss their takeover of the spice trade.

Every day it had taken to lay the groundwork for this meeting had cost him. His patience had been worn to shreds. Anakin had



## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

now been on Nar Shaddaa for two weeks. Enough time for him to be beaten. Imprisoned.

Killed.

Obi-Wan did not dwell on it, but it was in his mind all the same. He knew that if he simply appeared on Nar Shaddaa as a Jedi he would risk Anakin's life as well as Siri's. The Council had warned him that his plan must be careful and perfect. He had given his word to Adi Gallia that this would be so.

Didi had helped him establish an identity as Bakleeda and introduced him to the right contacts. Didi had taken a great personal risk doing so, for Obi-Wan had told him that he would have to reveal himself as a Jedi eventually. He could not prevent that. It might become known that Didi had helped smuggle a Jedi into the Krayn organization. There were many in the criminal underworld who would not appreciate that. But Didi had only swallowed twice rapidly and paled a bit before assuring Obi-Wan that he would take any risk for Obi-Wan and the memory of Qui-Gon.

Obi-Wan opened the door. The Colicoids were waiting, and he was relieved to see that he didn't know any of them. His face was hidden by his helmet, which came down over his eyes and nose, but it was better that no one could recognize him if something happened to dislodge it.

The three Colicoids gave him a brief glance but did not greet him.

They stood at the round table, talking together in their own language.

Words were interspersed with clicks and humming noises from their antennae and jointed legs. The Colicoids had been the ones who had put out word that they were looking for a slave trader with intelligence to represent them in a meeting. It had taken all of Obi-Wan's skill to convince their representative that he was the one they wanted.

One of the Colicoids turned to him. "I am Nor Fik. Do not speak unless asked a question."

## Jude Watson

Obi-Wan nodded.

They waited long minutes. Obi-Wan had been over the galaxy many times and had been present at scores of high-level meetings. On every world, no matter how different, one thing was always the same: The party with the most power was the last to arrive.

The door burst open and slammed against the wall. Krayn stood there, his bulk filling the doorway. "My friends!"

The Colicoids nodded coolly at Krayn.

"An ion storm delayed me. A trifle." Krayn waved a hand. "I would travel through worse to get here."

The Colicoids pointedly ignored this obvious lie. Krayn strode into the room and a Wookiee with a scarred face and an eye patch crowded in. It was Krayn's associate, Rashtah. If Krayn meant to intimidate the Colicoids, it worked. The Wookiee was a fierce companion.

Krayn's sharp eyes traveled over Obi-Wan before returning to the Colicoids with a beam of friendship. "So this is your observer. Hardly necessary but I accept it as I do anything among friends. You see how conciliatory I am?"

"And we see that you have brought an observer as well," Nor Fik said, indicating Rashtah.

Krayn grinned as he sat, placing a long vibroblade on the table before him. "It was a long journey. I needed company."

Rashtah remained standing but let out a growl of amusement.

"This is a waste of time," Nor Fik snapped. "Let us get down to business."

Krayn's grin faded. "That is why I am here."

"We have control of the spice trade," Nor Fik said, seating himself opposite Krayn. The other two Colicoids seated themselves next to him. "We want you —"

Krayn held up a meaty hand. "Ah. Excuse me. I suggest that no lies be spoken here, in the interest of our continued good fellowship."

"Lies?" Nor Fik asked in disbelief.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

Krayn leaned forward. "You do not control the spice trade. Not yet.

You are still having trouble along the Kessel Run."

"That is because your pirates are still attacking our ships!" Nor Fik said angrily. "Despite your assurances to the contrary. And you yourself attacked our ship without warning when our highest level officer Anf Dec was aboard — "

"A regrettable mistake," Krayn said.

The Colicoid clicked its antennae together. "Now who is lying."

Krayn looked pained. "Trust. Trust — it's so necessary to have it between partners, Nor. I trust you. I see I have to work harder to make you trust me."

Obi-Wan was surprised at Krayn's methods. He had expected Krayn to be as much of a bully in the conference room as he was in the rest of the galaxy. Instead, he was holding back.

"Let's talk about Nar Shaddaa," Nor Fik said, not bothering to respond to Krayn. "You need more capital to keep those factories going. We will supply it. Once we have the entire spice trade firmly in our grasp, you will have the exclusive contract to process the spice in your Nar Shaddaa plants. It is in our best interest that you remain there as a cover, as we are members of the Senate now and should not be linked to a criminal organization. Naturally we will continue to support your slave raids."

Krayn smiled. "I admire your methods, Nor. I agree to step up attacks on other ships along the Kessel Run. That should allow you to close the noose on the trade there. I assume that the capital I need will be transferred into my accounts by this afternoon?"

"Perhaps. If we get some things clear."

For the first time, Krayn looked unnerved. He covered it with a smile.

"Of course."

## Jude Watson

"My superiors demand an inspection of the factories on Nar Shaddaa,"

Nor Fik said. "After all, if we are giving you the contract, we have a right to a complete inspection. We are worried about your productivity — slaves have been dying in great numbers."

"It is unfortunate that lately there has been some increase in mortality.."

"Yes, it cuts into profits. It is harder and harder for you to conduct massive raids, thanks to the Senate cracking down on the slave trade," Nor Fik said. "If you don't keep your slaves healthy, you will have trouble replacing them."

"A healthy slave is a slave who dreams of escape," Krayn said.

"That is what security is for," Nor Fik said. "I am not suggesting that you pamper them. Feed them enough to keep going. When your ship is struggling, you must conserve your fuel, but reach your destination."

Obi-Wan felt revulsion rise deep within him. Krayn and Nor Fik were talking about living beings as if they were machines to be maintained.

*You're the one who doesn't understand!*

Anakin's tortured words filled his brain. His Padawan had been right.

He hadn't understood. He couldn't understand the depths of Anakin's feeling. As a child, Anakin had lived every day with the knowledge that his life meant nothing. That he was a possession, not a living being.

Obi-Wan struggled to maintain his calm. His heart cried out to move, to get on a ship and go to Nar Shaddaa.

"There is nothing wrong with the treatment of slaves on Nar Shaddaa,"

Krayn said, anger beginning to color his voice. "I know best —"

"Perhaps. But we need to see the operation firsthand."

"Captain Anf Dec has been given a tour."

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

"And he has recommended an independent observer. He was not allowed the access he expected."

Krayn looked astonished. "He didn't say a word! Naturally we would have given him a tour of any part of the operation — "

"He was put off with excuses and promises," Nor Fik interrupted. "And he is not experienced in the slave trade. Neither are we, nor are we qualified to judge the work ability of such an assortment of beings.

Therefore we have found an independent observer to report back to us. This is Bakleeda. He is in your business, and is willing to act as consultant for us."

Obi-Wan took one step forward.

"He will travel to Nar Shaddaa and you will give him free and open access. This is not negotiable. Agreed?"

Krayn hesitated. Obi-Wan could see a deep red flush on his neck. It was the only sign of his rage. "Agreed."

Obi-Wan remained impassive, but excitement flared within him. He had free access to Nar Shaddaa.

## Chapter Fifteen

Anakin was so exhausted that he craved his sleep-mat, on the hard ground in the large durasteel warehouse that served as slave quarters. The slaves were packed tightly in rows, and the rain came through leaks in the roof that made puddles that never dried. Sleep-mats were thin and tattered, and the cold and damp seeped up from the ground to chill bodies that had already been pushed to their limits.

No matter how much he craved sleep, it was elusive. Anakin lay awake long after others around him were breathing quietly, huddled under thin blankets, some pressed close to one another for warmth. He stared up at a tiny sliver of sky he could glimpse through the roof. He could not see a star, but he imagined one. He imagined his Master in a ship speeding past that star, straight to Nar Shaddaa.

Movement close to him jolted him to his elbows. Anakin peered through the darkness, expecting one of the scavenging creatures that overran the slave quarters. Instead, he saw someone crawling toward him. It was Mazie.

She squeezed in between him and his neighbor, who obligingly grunted and rolled slightly away to make room.

"I just wanted to thank you for today," she whispered. "I wasn't very nice to you at the beginning."

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

"I know," Anakin said with his characteristic bluntness. "I've been thinking about that. Why did you call me a *schutta*? What does it mean?"

Mazie squirmed. "I spoke harshly. A *schutta* is a weasel creature in my language. You see, you were assigned gravsled duty. It's easy duty, reserved for informants and favorites of the Nar Shaddaa guards. You must have someone protecting you."

"But I don't," Anakin protested. "I've only just arrived." But suddenly he knew who his protector was: Siri. But why should she protect him? Surely she'd lost any sense of loyalty to the Jedi long ago. He would never forget the bitterness in his Master's voice. Obi-Wan just wasn't wrong about people.

She must be playing with him, keeping him protected so that other slaves would despise him. Eventually, she would betray him.

Mazie shrugged. "If you have protection, I guess I shouldn't say anything. My daughter was favored by Krayn, though she'd done nothing to earn it. Berri is a domestic worker-slave in Krayn's kitchen. Every day I thank my stars that it is so. At least she is not working here. The Nar Shaddaa guards aren't bad, but the droids kill without mercy."

"Why do the people of Nar Shaddaa work as guards?" Anakin wondered.

"The planet's leader, Aga Culpa, has made an agreement with Krayn that its people will remain free in exchange for Krayn's control of the factories," Mazie explained. "There is not much honest work on Nar Shaddaa, and the guards are well paid. So tell me, how do you come to be here? Is this your first experience as a slave?"

"I was free when I was captured, but I was raised as a slave on Tatooine," Anakin said.

"Tatooine! But that is where Berri and I lived! We were colonists. My husband and I started a moisture farm. Berri and I were taken in a raid. It was ironic — there were many raids on

## Jude Watson

Ryloth. We left our home planet to escape them when Berri was born. She is now sixteen."

"How long ago were you captured?" Anakin asked eagerly.

"Ten years now," Mazie said. "I used to dream of escape. No more. My husband was killed in the raid along with countless others. He resisted."

"Did you happen to know a human woman named Hala?" Anakin asked eagerly. Perhaps Hala was still alive!

"Yes, we arrived here together. They brought us to processing. Hala saw Krayn and suddenly broke out of the line. She tried to kill him." Mazie cast her clear gaze down. "He struck her down and then... he made an example of her."

Anakin shuddered. He did not want to know the details.

"And he took her necklace as a souvenir," he muttered.

"Yes. I used to make many friends among the slaves," Mazie said. "No more. Too many die. There is no escape, Anakin, so do not imagine that there could be one for you. Krayn has a death grip on us. He will never let go."

The anger that always lay in wait deep within him surged. He directed it at Krayn. If it was the last act of his life, he would kill that fiend.

*No. It is not the Jedi way. Your anger feels like revenge.*

He was trembling with rage. He knew suddenly that he could not wait for Obi-Wan to rescue him. If he didn't try to escape, something essential in him would die.

Krayn would win. He saw the battle clearly and personally. It was him or Krayn.

"Do not fear, Anakin," Mazie said, misunderstanding his distress. "A slave's life is short. It will soon be over."

"No," Anakin said. "I will find a way out."



## Chapter Sixteen

Obi-Wan was given permission to land at Krayn's personal platform.

"You see?" Krayn had boasted back on Rorak 5. "I am showing every consideration."

Privately, Obi-Wan thought that someone who was doing the right thing for good motives did not call attention to it, but he did not point this out to the Colicoids. He had a feeling that Nor Fik felt the same.

He accessed the hatch and exited his transport. He was surprised there was no one to meet him. Technically he was allowed unlimited access, but Obi-Wan had felt sure that Krayn would try to control his movements.

Perhaps they were keeping him under surveillance.

There was no time to waste. Obi-Wan was anxious to get to the factories. Since it was also the objective of his alias Bakleeda, he would attract no suspicion by heading there immediately.

It wasn't hard to spot the factories below. Black smoke belched from the stacks and then passed through scrubbers. The air up in the city was clean, but Obi-Wan looked down on thick toxic air below.

## Jude Watson

Obi-Wan accessed the turbolift to take him to the moon's floor. He stepped inside and felt the turbolift drop. Soon he would find Anakin. His entire being was focused on that.

Suddenly, the turbolift stopped. Obi-Wan felt a surge in the Force that warned him of danger a split second before the trapdoor overhead opened and Rashtah dropped down.

The turbolift shook with the impact of the Wookiee hitting the floor.

As he landed, he struck out with one mighty hand. The blow sent Obi-Wan flying against the wall of the turbolift. His head hit the durasteel with a crack.

He reached for his lightsaber as Rashtah bellowed and came at him, casually smashing him again with a fist like a cannon. Obi-Wan felt the blow through his body armor. His arm went numb. He knew that when it came to brute strength, he was no match for a Wookiee. The last thing he could wish was to be trapped in a turbolift with one.

He reached with his other hand for his lightsaber. At the same time he whirled to evade Rashtah in a spinning motion. There was not much room to maneuver. The Wookiee definitely held the advantage. As Obi-Wan spun by him, Rashtah reached out and hit him again, this time with an elbow slamming into his stomach.

The air left Obi-Wan's lungs in a whoosh. Rashtah followed the blow with one to his chin, and he fell to his knees. He had not yet been able to get his lightsaber out of his belt. The blows were coming too fast, and now he only had the use of one hand. He had tucked his lightsaber securely inside the belt in order to conceal it. That had been a mistake.

Things didn't look good.

The smell of the creature's wet fur made it even harder to breathe.

Obi-Wan scrambled between Rashtah's legs to come up on his other side. He struck out with a series of fast combinations, using his legs as weapons.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

Rashtah grunted and tried to capture one leg, but Obi-Wan was too fast. At last he was able to activate his lightsaber.

Rashtah let out a surprised bellow that shook the walls of the turbolift. Obi-Wan attacked, whirling and diving, as Rashtah tried to defend himself. He gave up on his fists and withdrew an electrojabber and a vibro-ax. Obi-Wan guessed his objective. With the electro-jabber he would paralyze Obi-Wan and then administer the death blow with the vibro-ax.

It was imperative to avoid the electrojabber. If he was hit, he could be paralyzed for an hour, at least. Already feeling was coming back to his numb arm. Obi-Wan focused on healing it. It could mean the difference in the battle, for the Wookiee thought his right arm was useless.

Obi-Wan struck at Rashtah, but the creature deflected the blow with the vibro-ax. The two weapons tangled and smoke filled the air.

Turning, Obi-Wan suddenly tossed the lightsaber from his left hand to his right. He leaped forward and came at the Wookiee with a sky-to-ground sweep. He slashed at the creature's chest.

Rashtah's eyes glazed, and his howl was terrible. He dropped the electrojabber and clutched at his wound. At the same time he swung the vibro-ax. Obi-Wan brought the lightsaber down on the Wookiee's arm. The creature fell over, his mournful death cry fading as his spirit left his body.

Obi-Wan collapsed against the wall. Sweat stung his eyes. Rashtah had tried to kill him, but he did not glory in this outcome. Death at such close quarters was a devastating thing.

He hit the turbolift button and the lift dropped. By the time it reached the planet floor, Obi-Wan had risen, adjusted his body armor and helmet, and tucked his lightsaber back in his belt.

The doors opened. He was in a small enclosed anteroom. Through a window he could see a deserted yard outside. It held factory equipment that rusted in the rain.

He had a problem. If Rashtah's body was found, suspicion would be on him. Krayn wanted it that way. The pirate was

## **Jude Watson**

clever. If Rashtah had succeeded in killing him, fine. But if the slave trader Bakleeda somehow managed to kill the Wookiee, then Krayn could demand his removal from the planet, or kill Bakleeda himself. Either way, he would be rid of interference.

Obi-Wan dragged the heavy body of the Wookiee out into the drizzle. He rolled it underneath a pile of outdated machines.

Soon Krayn would look for Rashtah. The Wookiee would be found. Obi-Wan had less time than he'd thought. He had to find Anakin.

## Chapter Seventeen

As Anakin steered the gravsled to the drop-off pile, Mazie stepped closer. She had changed places with the worker closest to the pile, and she and Anakin exchanged smiles and glances throughout the day. It made the work almost bearable, Anakin thought.

He made note of the fact that although Mazie had claimed not to make friends anymore, she had certainly befriended him. He noticed that she watched out for others, too. If a worker's output was slackening, she quickly organized other slaves to help. If they spread the work among themselves, the droids didn't notice. As she passed down the line, she often put a hand on a shoulder here, or bestowed a quick smile there.

She had the loyalty of the slaves. Anakin both admired that and filed the information away.

Mazie drifted closer as he unloaded the battered durasteel bins full of cut spice.

"I have a little bread. Berri brought it to me," she whispered. "Here.

" She pressed a bit of bread in his hand.

"No," Anakin said, trying to give it back.

## Jude Watson

"You're young. You need your energy." Mazie quickly drifted back. If he followed her, he might attract the attention of the patrolling droids, and she knew it.

Anakin pocketed the piece of bread and finished unloading the bins. He would distribute it to a worker below who he noticed had been weakening daily.

He climbed up on the gravsled and hit the forward controls, ready to take the long tunnel down to the caverns below.

Suddenly Siri stood in front of him, her hands on her hips. He jerked the gravsled to a stop.

"What is in your pocket?" she asked.

He did not answer.

Her lips thinned. "Come with me, slave."

Anakin climbed off the gravsled. Siri led him to a corner away from the patrolling droids, the hooded gazes of the slaves, and noise of the machines.

She turned on him immediately, her blue eyes snapping. "It is foolish to break the rules here. You are not supposed to fraternize with other slaves during work hours. No speaking is allowed unless a few words are needed for work."

Anger sputtered through a weary Anakin. "You do not have to repeat the rules to me."

"So you choose to break them? That is stupid. You will call attention to yourself, and attention is never good here. Your duty is to keep your eyes down and survive."

"I am a slave, Siri," Anakin said, not bothering to hide the contempt in his voice. "I am your prisoner. Isn't that enough for you? Don't pull me aside to rub my face in it. How dare you?"

Siri looked at him, shocked.

"Who are you to tell me my duty?" Anakin spat out. "You betrayed us all. You turned your back on the Jedi and embraced the dark side. Now you are Krayn's spy. The ally of a slave trader, the most contemptible, despicable being in the galaxy —"

A low chuckle reached his ears. Anakin sputtered to a stop as Krayn stepped around the corner.

"Such praise," he said mockingly. "How lucky I am to be such an icon of evil to my property. It means I am doing something right."

"I was just reprimanding this slave," Siri said. "He is new and did not know the rules."

Krayn turned to her and his expression was no longer amused. "So you are a Jedi. What did he call you? Siri?"

"No longer," Siri said. "I left them long ago, but they have this ridiculous code of loyalty. They think they own me. *No one* owns me!"

"Ah, you forget something," Krayn said. "I do." Siri's eyes blazed.

"No one owns me, Krayn." Suddenly guard droids appeared around the corner and surrounded them.

"I left the Jedi for good," Siri said. There was no trace of begging in her voice. "I have been your loyal associate, Krayn."

"Yes, the best I ever had," Krayn said sadly. "Yet I cannot take the chance that you are a spy. Whether you are loyal or not doesn't matter — you are a risk. You were the one to advise me about taking unnecessary risks, Zora. Isn't it ironic that you will be put to death because of that?"

"He turned to the droids. "These two are Jedi. Take them into the security prison to await execution." He smiled at Siri. "I think a little show for the Colicoids might be a good start for our partnership."

The guards surrounded Anakin and Siri in a tight circle. They marched the two prisoners down the row toward the exit. Mazie looked at him furtively and tried to give him a smile of support. He gave her a meaningful glance.

The guards marched Anakin and Siri to Krayn's complex high above the factory floor. Anakin was surprised that Siri did not try to resist. He wondered if she still had her lightsaber somewhere. If she had, surely she would use it.

## Jude Watson

They were locked together in the lowest level of Krayn's complex in a high-security cell. Anakin put his palms on the door as if he could force it open.

"The Colicoids are already here for the meeting," Siri said. "It might not be too long."

Anakin didn't speak to her.

The guards had stripped Siri of her weapons, but she reached into a slit in her utility belt and came up with a small device. She activated it.

"No listening devices," she murmured. "Good."

Anakin said nothing. If she thought he was going to speak to a traitor, she was crazy as well as evil.

"Anakin," Siri said quietly, "I am still a Jedi. I am working undercover."

He turned, surprised. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"You don't. You have to trust me. Even Obi-Wan didn't know. No one at the Temple does, except for the Jedi Council. This was our final attempt to clean up Nar Shaddaa and end Krayn's reign of terror."

Anakin waited as Siri's words sunk in. His brain did not weigh her words. He allowed himself to feel them, to tap into Siri's essence.

"I believe you," he said at last.

"Good." She sat cross-legged on the floor. "Not that my being a Jedi helps us at the moment. But it makes things a little more pleasant in here."

"Anakin was suddenly stabbed with guilt. "I blew your cover!"

She waved a hand. "It's all right."

"It's not! I compromised the mission. Obi-Wan has always instructed me to be careful with what I say in anger."

"I am sure that he also told you that I am responsible for my own risks," Siri said firmly. "And I'm sure he advised you to



recognize the danger of your impulsiveness and then move on without blame, only wisdom."

Anakin smiled. "You sound just like him."

"I know him well. He has this habit of telling you the truth just when you don't want to hear it." Anakin laughed and discovered that he liked Siri.

He sat down opposite her.

"I've been keeping an eye on you, Anakin," she said. "I'm impressed with your kindness and bravery. I saw how you tried to help the weak ones when you could."

Anakin's grin faded. "I know what it's like to be a slave."

"Yes. And it is unfortunate that events placed you here. You have shown remarkable patience and strong will. I believe you'll make a fine Jedi."

"If I'm not executed first."

"It's not over yet," Siri said. "Obi-Wan is somewhere on Nar Shaddaa, I'm sure. The Council sent him here."

Anakin brightened. "He is? But how can he get to us?"

"He'll find a way."

"So Krayn is in league with the Colicoids," Anakin said. "That's why Captain Dec was here."

"The Colicoids are taking over the spice trade, and they need to make a deal with Krayn to process the spice here on Nar Shaddaa. The leader of Nar Shaddaa will look the other way, as he always does."

Anakin nodded thoughtfully. What Siri had just told him reinforced his own suspicions as well as the forming of his plan.

"We can't afford to wait here for rescue," Anakin told Siri. "If the Colicoids are here on Nar Shaddaa, we have to act now."

"And do what?"

"If we can convince the Colicoids that it is in their best interests to take over the Nar Shaddaa operation, then Nar Shaddaa will come under the laws of the Republic, since the Colicoids are members."

"True," Siri admitted.

## Jude Watson

"So slavery will be outlawed."

"That's exactly why they wouldn't do it," Siri said. "They need slaves. Or rather, they convince themselves they do out of their own greed."

"Exactly. So we have to use their greed against them. We have to convince the Colicoids that they can still make enormous profits without slaves. They can do this by eliminating Krayn as the middleman. They won't have to give him a cut of the profits, or rely on his abilities to run the factories, or worry about him cheating them."

"What makes you think the Colicoids would listen to that argument?"

Siri asked. "They're very cautious."

"Their caution and their greed will force them to listen," Anakin said. "But we have to make them think that if they don't do it, they will lose everything. I'll bet they already distrust Krayn."

"Everybody does," Siri said. "That is, if they're smart."

"If we can convince the Colicoids that Krayn has a shaky hold on Nar Shaddaa and is in danger of losing the factories, they'll be more willing to take the chance to overthrow him."

"Why would they think that?" Siri asked.

"Because there will be a slave rebellion while the Colicoids are here," Anakin responded quickly. "The slaves will blow up part of the factory."

If the Colicoids see this, they might seize that moment of weakness to take over."

Siri stared at him. "But why would the slaves rebel?"

"Because they want to be free," Anakin said.

Siri shook her head. "It's not that simple, Anakin. The guards hold those slaves in the grip of fear. Their brutality over the years has been great. The slaves risk too much."

"If they felt that they had a chance.." Anakin said thoughtfully.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

"Yes, some sort of guarantee that made it worth the risk," Siri said slowly. "I have an idea. You're leaving out the third party in all this — the leader of Nar Shaddaa. He is in control of the civilian guards. If we can convince him that it's in his best interests to back the Colicoids over Krayn, he can instruct the guards to look the other way when the slaves rebel. Nar Shaddaa will become part of the Republic, and the natives will enjoy the benefits of alliances and trade."

"Of course!" Anakin enthused. "That's the missing key."

"I've been involved in some high-level meetings," Siri told him. "The Colicoid representatives know me. If I can get to them, I can lay the whole thing out. I can make them suspicious of Krayn's abilities. They'll trust me, since I'm his advisor. I know Aga Culp, the leader of Nar Shaddaa, too."

"And I'll talk to the slaves," Anakin said.

Siri sighed. "There's only one problem. We're in a high-security cell.

And both our lightsabers are in my quarters. We can't break out."

Anakin smiled.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Don't tell me you have a plan for that, too."

"Of course," Anakin said.

Siri shook her head. "You remind me of someone I knew well years ago.

He never let up, either. Made me think fast to keep up with him." She grinned. "Just don't ever tell Obi-Wan I said so."

"It's funny," Anakin said. "I thought you hated him."

Siri stretched her muscles. "Of course I don't hate him. He just gets on my nerves." Her vivid blue eyes glinted. "But then again, most beings do."

## Chapter Eighteen

Obi-Wan had tried everything he knew. He had reached out with the Force, trying to locate Siri or Anakin. His Padawan's connection was so strong that he'd felt sure that once he was inside the factory he would be able to locate him. But all he felt was a void.

He had walked over much of the factory, and the day was waning. He had looked into the faces of hundreds of slaves. He had seen misery and sickness and exhaustion. He had not seen his Padawan.

He found a private place to contact the Temple. Adi Gallia answered his call.

"We have lost contact with Siri," she said. "We cannot help you, Obi-Wan. You're on your own."

He acknowledged the transmission and quickly tucked the comlink in his tunic. Something indeed was very wrong. It was time to locate Krayn.

Obi-Wan took the lift tube to Krayn's sprawling complex. As he walked toward Krayn's private quarters, he felt a disturbance in the Force. He paused, but he couldn't trace it. Still, it worried him.

Krayn's receiving room surprised Obi-Wan. He had expected richness, a display of Krayn's enormous wealth to show how

important he was. But the room was almost bare. The floor was of plain rough stone. The only sign of Krayn's ego was an enormous chair carved out of rare greel wood.

Krayn was standing as Obi-Wan arrived. "So," he said in a jovial tone, "have you seen all that you have come to see?"

"No," Obi-Wan reported shortly. "I have toured some of the factory on my own, but I request a guide. Someone who knows your operation well."

"Hmmm," Krayn said. "That would be Rashtah. Strange, however. No one has been able to find him today. You didn't happen to run into him in your travels, did you? A large Wookiee with a bad temper?"

It was a test, of course. Krayn was playing with him. He knew very well that if Obi-Wan was now standing in front of him, the Wookiee had failed.

"No. Perhaps someone else can substitute."

"I will find someone, of course. I'll send them to you."

"I'll be on the factory floor — "

Krayn's eyes glittered. "Don't worry. I always know where to find you.

" Obi-Wan's sense of unease was growing. Krayn felt too secure. Why? Did he know that Obi-Wan was a Jedi? Or was he confident because his deal with the Colicoids was close to being completed?

Obi-Wan paused at the same spot he had felt a disturbance in the Force earlier. He reached out, gathering the Force around him, pushing himself to reach deeper, farther, wider. He did not feel an answering call from Anakin. Yet he knew one thing: His greatest fear had not been realized. His Padawan was still alive.

But if he was alive, that meant he was thinking. Planning. Obi-Wan fervently hoped his impulsive Padawan would remember patience and caution.

At least he could be with Siri...

Apprehension suddenly snaked through Obi-Wan. If Anakin and Siri were together, anything could happen.

## Jude Watson

Hours later, a tiny slit in the door opened and a tray was pushed through. On it was a protein wafer as hard as a rock, some water, and a moldy piece of bread.

"No, thank you," Siri said.

Anakin approached the tray eagerly. He tore open the piece of bread.

Inside was a message written on a scrap of durasheet.

WHAT CAN I DO? BERRI Siri looked over his shoulder. "Who is that?"

"She's my friend Mazie's daughter. She works in the kitchens here."

Anakin was glad Mazie had thought of asking for Berri's help. He had counted on it. "Where did you hide your lightsaber? And, while you're at it, mine?"

"In my quarters," Siri answered. "Underneath my sleep-couch."

"That's original."

Siri looked annoyed. "It's handy. And no one ever cleans. I didn't have to worry about being discovered. There are weapons checks throughout Krayn's complex. I couldn't take a chance that my lightsaber would be found."

Anakin wrote carefully with the implement wrapped in the durasheet.

ZORA'S BED. WEAPONS.

He placed the tray back on the shelf. Minutes later, the slit opened.

The tray was grabbed from outside.

"This could be a trick," Siri said worriedly.

"If it is, we're no worse off," Anakin pointed out. "And it's not a trick. Mazie is loyal."

After a moment, Siri nodded. "I trust who you trust." They sat down to wait. The minutes ticked by, then an hour.

"I was never good at the patience exercises at the Temple," Siri groaned.

"Me, neither," Anakin admitted.

Siri blew out a breath. "Obi-Wan always was."

At last the panel slid open, and two lightsabers tumbled to the floor, followed by two comlinks.

"Thank you, Berri," Anakin whispered through the opening. He could not see Mazie's daughter. "Now get back to your post."

They waited until they were sure that Berri was clear. Then they activated their lightsabers. Anakin felt a surge of confidence as he saw the blue glow. He didn't feel like a slave anymore. He was a Jedi again.

Together they cut through the thick door. The durasteel peeled back, and Siri stepped through the opening, followed by Anakin.

There were no guards in the corridor.

"Krayn always trusts high-tech security too much," Siri muttered.

"Let's head for Aga Culpa." There were only three droid guards stationed in the entrance to the basement prison. Siri and Anakin paused after peeking around the corner to glimpse them.

"We don't have time for complicated strategy," Siri said. "Let's just charge them."

They activated their lightsabers again and were on the droids before they could respond to the attack. They both leaped high in the air and then came down, slicing their lightsabers through the droids and splitting them in half. As the third droid kept up blaster fire, it retreated to the console desk, no doubt to raise an alarm. Anakin cut down the droid while Siri whirled and buried her shaft in the console communication panel. It sizzled and smoked.

"We'd better hurry now," Siri said.

She led the way to an exit following a little-used passageway. "This is Krayn's private escape route," she told Anakin. "It leads to his landing platform, and it's only a short distance from there to Aga Culpa. Krayn insisted that Culpa enjoy the comfort of the complex, but actually he just wanted to keep an eye on him."

## Jude Watson

Anakin followed Siri to Krayn's landing platform and then to another walkway that led to another quadrant of the complex. Siri accessed the door and walked in.

They found Aga Culpa sitting in front of a holographic game.

"Busy as usual, I see," Siri said, striding in and shutting off the game.

Aga Culpa looked up. The expression on his face was such an odd mixture of outrage, embarrassment, and apprehension that Anakin was almost tempted to laugh. Culpa was a thin humanoid male with a slack-muscle body that he clothed in skintight tech fabric. He wore a tiny matching cap on his bald head.

"How dare you burst into my private quarters!" he blustered. Then he looked nervous. "Does Krayn want to see me?"

"No. I do." Siri sat astride a chair. "This is my slave, Anakin. We may speak freely in front of him."

Anakin bristled inside at being called a slave, but he understood the necessity for it.

"I've come to give you a message from the Colicoids," Siri said. "They are going to take over the factories of Nar Shaddaa. Naturally Krayn is not aware of this."

The apprehension on Aga Culpa's face changed to fear. "Take over?" he whispered.

"They have the power," Siri said. "And a close associate of Krayn's has agreed to help them. That's me. I always liked you, Culpa, so I'm giving you the opportunity to join us."

"Against Krayn?" Aga Culpa gripped the arms of his chair.

"It would be a smart move. And easy. All you have to do is nothing."

Tell the guards of the Nar Shaddaa factories not to interfere with the slaves."

"I can't do that," Aga Culpa said. "Krayn would kill me."

"Are you so sure that you're safe from the Colicoids if you do not?"

Siri asked pleasantly.



## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

Aga Culpa's look of fearful unease intensified. He shook his head. "N- no. I can't go against Krayn."

Siri gave a quick look of exasperation at Anakin. Obviously Aga Culpa was too weak and paralyzed with terror to take a risk. She shrugged. Anakin knew what was in her mind.

He felt the Force gather in the room. It was powerful, and he admired Siri's grasp of it. She turned her attention back to Aga Culpa and passed a hand in front of his face.

"Contact the Nar Shaddaa slave guards. if there is a revolt, order them to do nothing."

"I will order them to do nothing. I will contact the guards." Aga Culpa's voice was toneless, but the mind suggestion had worked. On such a weak will as Culpa's, it had been easy.

"Do it now."

They watched as Aga Culpa activated his comlink and spoke to the commanding officer. He overrode the officer's expression of disbelief with a firm repeat of the order.

"Do it or suffer the consequences," Siri whispered. "Do it or suffer the consequences," Aga Culpa repeated. He shut off the communication.

"Thanks, Culpa. I appreciate your support." Siri sprang off the chair athletically and strode toward the door.

As soon as she and Anakin were outside, she frowned. "The Colicoids won't be so easy. Jedi mind tricks won't work. I'll have to go alone, Anakin."

"I need to talk to the slaves, anyway."

"I don't need to wish you luck," Siri said. "I know you can do it."

"Luck always helps. I'll wait for your signal." Anakin ran toward the turbolift. He had gained great confidence in Siri.

It took Anakin a few minutes of careful strategy to get around the patrolling guard droids in the factory. He stealthfully slipped next to Mazie on the assemblyline, hoping the guards would not do a sudden head count Quickly, he explained the situation and what he needed.

## Jude Watson

She gazed at him, amazed. "You really do mean to break out, don't you.

" "Not alone," Anakin said. "With all of us, together."

"I can't do it, Anakin," Mazie said in a low tone as her fingers continued to work. "I can't ask them to risk so much."

"All we have to worry about is the droids. The Nar Shaddaa guards will look the other way."

"The droids are enough."

"What if I created a diversion? An explosion? I know where the explosives are kept in the caverns."

Mazie bit her lip. "I don't know.." she murmured.

"It's the only way, Mazie. Do you want to end your life here, like this? Do you want Berri to live as a slave?"

"You're not fair."

"But I'm right."

"Perhaps... perhaps there is a core group who will revolt," she said slowly.

"You will contact them?"

She nodded.

"Others will see us succeed and will join us," Anakin said confidently.

"I hope you are right," Mazie murmured. Her hands now trembled as she worked.

Anakin slipped away. The end of the shift was only minutes away.

Everything depended on Siri now.

## Chapter Nineteen

Unable to find Anakin or Siri, Obi-Wan had to report to the Colicoid delegation or risk blowing his cover. He was just beginning his report when Siri burst in.

Relief flooded Obi-Wan as he saw she was safe. He stepped back against the wall so that she would not be distracted if she recognized him. He saw determination on her face — Siri had a plan.

"You must excuse me for coming uninvited to this meeting," she said, turning to Nor Fik. "I come to you without Krayn's knowledge."

Nor Fik looked surprised but immediately tried to hide it. "Go on."

"It is my belief that if you allow Krayn to keep control of the spice factories on Nar Shaddaa, you will lose them and we will all lose the enormous profits we gain from them," Siri said.

"And why should we listen to you?" Nor Fik asked in a frosty tone.

"Because I know more about Krayn's operations than he does," Siri said. "The slaves are poised to revolt. He doesn't have enough security to handle it."

Nor Fik turned to Obi-Wan. "And what do you think, Bakleeda?"

## Jude Watson

"What I've seen supports what she says," Obi-Wan said shortly. He knew that if he said too much it could backfire.

Siri looked at him curiously. She knew something was off, but she hadn't recognized him. Obi-Wan was tempted to reach out through the Force, but resisted. She didn't need to know who he was. He had guessed her plan and would follow her lead.

Siri's fingers hooked into her utility belt as she waited for Nor Fik to make a decision. Obi-Wan saw her finger tense, then relax. He glimpsed a signaling device tucked inside.

She was sending a signal. That could only mean one thing. Anakin.

"This needs further study," Nor Fik said. "We cannot make a decision based on a few opinions. We are not prepared to take over the entire operation of Nar Shaddaa."

"But you expect to someday," Siri guessed shrewdly. "You won't cut Krayn in forever. You will observe his methods and how you can improve them, and you will move in. He will be no match for you. It is my belief that the spice factories can be run more efficiently with workers rather than slaves. The help you would receive from the Republic would be of enormous benefit. You already have great power in the Senate."

"You speak eloquently, Zora, but again, I must — "

Nor Fik's words were drowned out by a sudden explosion. Siri was almost thrown to the floor, but kept her feet. One of the Colicoids tumbled off his chair and quickly righted himself, embarrassed.

Siri, Obi-Wan, and Nor Fik hurried to the window. They had a panoramic view of the spice processing plant below. A large column of smoke was snaking up from one of the buildings.

"The rebellion has begun," Siri said. "Do you believe me now?"

Nor Fik stared down at the factory. A moment later, the doors opened and slaves spilled out. Some of them carried weapons they had stolen from the Nar Shaddaa guards.

"Where is Krayn?" Nor Fik asked Siri.

## **STAR WARS: Path to Truth**

"In his quarters."

"Perhaps it is time he was... detained."

Siri put a hand on the hilt of her lightsaber. "I can arrange that."

## Chapter Twenty

Anakin had gathered the team of slaves to set the explosives. He had destroyed a small squad of guard droids with a combination of the Force and his lightsaber. The victory over the guard droids had caused a giant cheer to rise among the slaves, and soon they stripped the droids of weapons and fashioned their own. The rebellion spread.

Anakin stopped only long enough to ensure that the explosion had worked and that the slaves had the upper hand in the battle. The Nar Shaddaa guards all quickly put down their blasters and left the area. The slaves picked up the weapons and turned on the droids.

Anakin raced from the factory toward the turbolift. If he knew Krayn, he guessed that the pirate would not remain on Nar Shaddaa. As soon as Krayn knew the rebellion could not be put down, he would head for his transport. Anakin intended to stop him.

He burst out on the landing platform in time to see Krayn hurrying toward his ship. The pirate carried a blaster in one hand and a vibro-ax in the other.

Anakin raced from the opposite end of the platform, his lightsaber already activated. Krayn saw him and quickened his pace.

## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

But Anakin was faster. With a leap, he landed in front of Krayn.

"It is time to pay for your crimes," he said.

"Not by the likes of you, boy," Krayn sneered.

Anakin attacked. He felt no fear. There was something in his blood, something strange, as though ice now moved through his veins. It was not anger, he told himself. It did not feel like anger. It felt like justice.

Purpose.

All the lives below in the factories, all the lives he had known on Tatooine, his mother, Hala, Amee, all who had suffered, they were in his hands. Everyone he'd lost, everyone he'd loved. Even Qui-Gon was here, urging him on, he felt sure.

He slashed out at Krayn. The pirate was quicker than he expected.

Blaster fire singed the sleeve of Anakin's tunic. Anakin reversed and kicked out, hoping to dislodge the weapon from Krayn's meaty fist. But the pirate absorbed the blow and held on.

The *ping* of blaster fire followed Anakin as he somersaulted and landed to Krayn's left. The pirate dodged the first lightsaber pass and Anakin tossed the lightsaber to his other hand and came at him from a surprising angle. Krayn bellowed as the lightsaber grazed him.

He lifted the vibro-ax as though it were a toy, and came at Anakin from below. Startled, Anakin twisted away, but not before the vibro-ax grazed his wrist. The pain was blinding. If Krayn had been a centimeter or two closer, he would have severed his hand.

Anakin tossed the lightsaber back to his good hand. He leaped around Krayn and attacked from behind. Krayn turned and aimed the blaster. Anakin dodged the fire and moved forward, forcing Krayn to back up.

He felt righteousness pump through him. From now on, he would make no mistakes.

## Jude Watson

Memories pounded in him, of his mother, of Amee's tears for months after Hale was captured. He matched Krayn's viciousness with his own, driving him back toward the wall so he would have him at bay. He saw the first flicker of fear in Krayn's eyes and he enjoyed it.

"You will die at my hands, Krayn," he said through his teeth. "You will die at the hands of a boy."

Krayn was too exhausted to answer. His hair was wet and matted, and his powerful arm shook as he tried to raise the vibro-ax against Anakin.

Anakin had him now. He would show no mercy. Krayn deserved none. There was no capturing him. There was only killing him.

Obi-Wan had followed Siri from the conference room. As soon as they were alone, he whipped off his mask.

"I thought so," Siri said. "You were never good at disguise."

"I fooled you," Obi-Wan said. "Admit it."

She bared her teeth at him. "Never."

He followed her at a run to Krayn's quarters. He was not in his receiving room, or in the control center.

"He wouldn't go down to the factory," Siri said. "He wouldn't want to be anywhere near the rebellion."

They exchanged glances.

"The landing platform," Siri said, and took off.

They pounded through the corridors and burst out the exit. At the opposite end, Anakin held Krayn at bay. The pirate was bent over, breathing heavily. As they watched, a vibro-ax fell from his bleeding hand and clattered to the ground. He lifted his face to his attacker.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan shouted. He started toward him. Siri circled in case she needed to flank him for support.

His Padawan did not hear him. On his face was an intensity that Obi-Wan had never seen before.

Anakin raised his lightsaber to deliver the fatal blow.

"Don't!" Obi-Wan shouted.



## STAR WARS: Path to Truth

The lightsaber slashed downward. Anakin sunk it in Krayn's chest.

Krayn's mouth opened in a wordless scream. He locked eyes with Anakin. Then he toppled to the ground.

EPILOGUE A few days later, Obi-Wan and Siri sat with Anakin and watched as the sleek silver transport set down on Krayn's landing platform.

"We'll certainly be returning to Coruscant in style," Siri observed.

She looked more like her old self now, dressed in a simple tunic, her face scrubbed clean, her blond hair tucked behind her ears and gleaming in the weak sun.

"It's not often that a Senate delegation comes to congratulate us on a mission and give us a lift home," Obi-Wan said. "As a matter of fact, it's never."

"I guess they are grateful for the liberation of Nar Shaddaa," Siri said.

"Not to mention the downfall of Krayn and his pirate empire," Obi-Wan said. "The galaxy will be safer for many."

Anakin nodded. Obi-Wan studied his face. It was so boyish and open.

The glimpse he had seen of something dark, something feral, in the fight with Krayn was fading. The boy he knew had taken its place. Anakin had explained that Krayn still held a blaster. His life had been in danger. He had not violated the Jedi code by killing him.

Yet Obi-Wan still felt doubts. Doubts he could not share. Siri had not seen the expression on Anakin's face.

"Come, let's greet them," Obi-Wan said as the landing ramp came down.

"Wait, there's Mazie and Berri," Anakin said. "I have to say hello."

"Anakin, Chancellor Palpatine has come here himself," Obi-Wan reminded him.

Anakin grinned and ran his hand over his hair. "I know."

## Jude Watson

Obi-Wan nodded. Anakin was right. Because of Mazie and Berri, they had succeeded in their mission. The politicians could wait.

Mazie and Berri approached. Mazie was limping slightly. She had been wounded in the battle.

"We know you are leaving," Mazie said. "We could not let you leave without thanking you." She was speaking to all of them, but her gaze remained on Anakin. "You freed us all."

"You freed yourself," Anakin corrected. "It is I who should be thanking you." He turned to Berri. "And you, Berri. I'm glad to meet you at last. You showed great courage in helping Siri and me escape."

"I did only what I could," Berri said.

"That was a great deal," Siri said.

"The Colicoids have offered us wages to remain," Mazie said. "We will do so until we have enough to get off-planet. Nar Shaddaa is no place to live."

"Perhaps the Jedi can help with relocation and transport," Siri said.

"We'll be in contact after we reach the Temple."

Mazie and Berri exchanged happy glances. "That would be very good,"

Mazie said. "Safe journey home."

Berri smiled. "You won't have to worry about pirates."

Mazie reached out and grasped Anakin's shoulders in a sudden display of emotion. "You have guaranteed our safety and our lives by killing Krayn.

We will never forget it."

"I will never forget you," Anakin said.

The three Jedi turned and headed for the Senate delegation. Chancellor Palpatine smiled and held out his hands.

"The Jedi have brought freedom to Nar Shaddaa at last," he said. "Now we can begin to clean up this world. The Colicoids need our help, and we need theirs." He shrugged. "It is the price

we pay for the liberation of Nar Shaddaa and the end of Krayn. The Senate thanks you for your great service to the galaxy."

The Jedi nodded respectfully.

"Now, come aboard. We have everything prepared for a comfortable journey back to Coruscant," Palpatine said. Putting a hand on Anakin's shoulder, he led the way to the ship.

Obi-Wan hesitated, Siri by his side. He watched as Palpatine bent his head close to Anakin's to speak to him. What was making him uneasy?

Was it the memory of what he'd seen on Anakin's face in the battle with Krayn? His Padawan had been in the heat of battle and afraid for his life. He felt that Krayn was about to shoot. He had every reason to kill him. He had not killed him out of anger and revenge.

Yet when Anakin had turned to face him fully, his expression had been so empty. His gaze held neither triumph nor distress. Only blankness.

He had been numb from the experience of battle, Obi-Wan told himself.

He himself had felt the same at times.

*I will not abandon him, Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan privately vowed. I see what you see. I see how he struggles. I see his immense capacity for good.*

Siri moved closer to him. "It appears that your Padawan has impressed the Chancellor. He has great gifts."

"Yes," Obi-Wan agreed. "Yet he has so much to learn."

The vision of Qui-Gon in the cave of Ilum rose in his mind. He didn't know what the vision was trying to tell him, except to go on. He would go on. He would guide his gifted Padawan as best he knew how. He would not fail.







## **Book One**

# **The Way of the Apprentice**





STAR  
WARS®

# JEDI QUEST

BY JUDE WATSON

THE WAY OF THE APPRENTICE





## Prologue

*Not in living memory—not even among the oldest Jedi Masters—could they remember a Padawan who was as gifted as Anakin Skywalker. He could have advanced through his Temple training in half the time it had taken him. From the beginning, he had been far beyond his classmates in lightsaber skills and mastery of the Force. Yet in matters of the heart and mind, he still had much to learn, as Yoda continually pointed out.*

*His teachers had known how gifted he was, but they gave him the same drills and assignments as the other students. They knew he was bored at times, but it was important not to single him out, not to treat him as special.*

*But Anakin was special, and they all knew it. The trouble was that he knew it as well.*

*He had been a unique case from the moment he entered Jedi training at the Temple. For one thing, he had been allowed to enter despite having passed the usual age. For another, he had been chosen as a Padawan by Obi-Wan Kenobi from the start. While the other students wondered when they would be chosen, and by whom, Anakin's destiny was assured.*

*Obi-Wan watched Anakin's progress with an eye that was both loving and careful. In one hand he held Qui-Gon's faith; in the other he held Yoda's caution. There were times it was hard to balance these two powerful influences.*

*On the morning of Anakin's thirteenth birthday, Obi-Wan had presented him with his Padawan gift. It was the gift that Qui-Gon had given*

## Jude Watson

*Obi-Wan on his own thirteenth birthday, a Force-sensitive river stone. Obi-Wan was ashamed to remember how he'd been disappointed by the gift. He had been so young. He had wanted something significant, something like the gifts other Padawans had received—special hilts for their lightsabers or cloaks made from the lightweight, warm wool from the planet Pasmin. Instead, Qui-Gon had given him a rock.*

*Yet that present had turned into his most valuable possession. The smooth black stone glowed with heat against his heart. It had warmed his cold hands on many planets. It had nestled inside a tiny pocket his friend Bant had sewn in his tunic, close to his heart.*

*It was hard to give it up. But somehow he knew Qui-Gon would want him to.*

*Unlike Obi-Wan's first reaction, Anakin's face showed deep appreciation. Then his expression clouded. "Are you sure?" he asked. "This was given to you by Qui-Gon."*

*"He would want you to have it, as I do. It is my most treasured possession." Obi-Wan reached out and closed Anakin's fingers over the stone. "I hope it will be with you always to remind you of Qui-Gon and me, of our deep regard for you."*

*Anakin's smile lit his face. "I'll treasure it. Thank you, Master."*

*In many ways, Anakin was more openhearted, more generous than he had once been, Obi-Wan thought. Though there was a great weight on Anakin due to the prophecy, he was sure that Anakin would do well.*

*Now Anakin was fourteen. He was an able Padawan who had already proven himself on several important missions. Yet there was one thing that nagged at Obi-Wan. Anakin was liked by the other students, but he had no close friends. He was not loved.*

*Obi-Wan told himself that Anakin's gifts naturally set him apart. But in his heart, he grieved for Anakin's loneliness. He was happy for Anakin's skill and growing command of the Force. But he wished a simple thing for Anakin. It was something he could not give his Padawan. It was not a gift he could hand over, like a well-loved river stone. He wished for a friend.*

# Chapter One

Anakin made his way down an alley deep below the gleaming surface of Coruscant. His Padawan braid was tucked inside his tunic, his lightsaber hidden in the folds of his cloak. The Jedi were treated with great respect everywhere on Coruscant—except here. Close to the planet’s surface, there were those who matched their contempt for good society with their need to hide from it. Everyone was equal here. Equally despised.

Even air taxis didn’t descend this far. It had taken him over an hour to walk down the descending ramps, since the lift tubes were often nonfunctional. If only he had an airspeeder! Then these raids could be done in half the time. But Jedi students didn’t have access to their own speeders. Not even Padawans. Technically, he wasn’t supposed to be outside the Temple at all, not without Obi-Wan’s permission.

*“Technically” is just another way of saying you are breaking the rules,* Obi-Wan would say. *Either you obey a rule, or you do not.*

He was devoted to his Master, yet sometimes Obi-Wan’s earnestness could really get in the way. Anakin didn’t believe in breaking Jedi rules. He just wanted to find the spaces between them.

Anakin was well aware that his Master knew of these midnight jaunts. Obi-Wan was amazingly perceptive. He could sense a

## Jude Watson

shift in emotion or thought faster than an eyeblink. Thank the moon and stars that Obi-Wan also preferred not to hear about his midnight trips. As long as Anakin was discreet and didn't get into trouble, Obi-Wan would turn a blind eye.

Anakin didn't want to trouble Obi-Wan, but he couldn't help himself. As the night wore on and the Temple quieted, as the Jedi students turned off their glow rods and settled down for night meditation and sleep, Anakin just got restless. The lure of the streets called him. There were projects he had to complete, droids he was building or refining, parts to scavenge, rusty treasures to uncover. But mostly he just needed to be outside, under the stars.

*Only those of us who have been slaves can really taste freedom*, he sometimes thought.

His favorite scavenger heap was down here, in the dark underbelly of the city. The glow lights were seldom repaired and the glittering lights of the city above didn't penetrate down this far. This was where the junk dealers dumped their unwanted heaps—the stuff even they couldn't sell. It was left in smoking, stinking gray piles for the lowest of the low to pick over.

Fights often erupted at these scavenger heaps. Anakin had been lucky to avoid the squabbles that could end in violence. In addition to the desperate, there were bands of Manikons, a tribe from a planet lost long ago to a civil war so devastating it had caused the small band of survivors to flee to Coruscant. Now the Manikons survived by their wits and their weapons. They were perfectly willing to fight to the death over a rusty hydrosponder.

Anakin slipped among the smoky piles. Normally he avoided this particular junkyard, but he had a difficult tech problem with a malfunctioning droid, and he had exhausted all his other venues for finding what he needed. He knew that his Master looked at his tinkering with droids and tech devices as a waste of his time. Maybe it was. Anakin didn't care. He had come to realize that he needed to occupy his mind in order to stop the voices in his head. The voices that doubted he'd ever be a great

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

Jedi Knight. The voices that told him he'd abandoned his mother....

Anakin shook his head. Working on the droids was the one slender thread that connected him to his childhood on Tatooine. It was a frayed thread he was not willing to snap off completely.

The smell came to his nostrils, a mixture of smoky metal and something unpleasantly organic, the residue of food or waste. He tuned it out as his gaze eagerly swept the rubble.

He was grateful for his Jedi training. His eyes were sharp, even in the shadows. He did not want to risk a glow rod. It was dangerous to advertise your presence here. Better to act as a shadow.

He kept his eyes trained on the ground as he walked. Sometimes parts dropped off the giant hydrolifts that were used to transport the junk. He had uncovered some great finds by kicking through the dirt and debris beneath his boots.

Ah—a circuit, almost completely intact. Anakin rubbed it against his tunic, not caring about the crusty dirt that left a dark stain. He tucked it in his belt. And here—part of a hydrospanner. He could always use that, just in case he broke the ones he had. Cheaper to fuse an old one than to look for an intact one.

He scanned the heap ahead of him. One of his goals was to assemble his own small power terminal in his room so that he would not have to hook up to the Temple's terminal in order to power his droids. The more he stayed out of sight with his hobby, the better.

There—he could see it on top of the heap. Could it be a motivator circuit board? Yes—if he could just manage to Force-jump up there without sending the assembled heap of junk tumbling. He scanned the side of the heap for a good landing site. A battered piece of durasteel seemed to rest solidly on the junk beneath it. If he landed softly, he should be able to balance on it long enough to swipe the piece. He was a Jedi, and his balance was perfect. Anakin jumped.

## Jude Watson

He landed a bit harder than he had meant to, and with a little too much pressure on his right foot.

*You're not a Jedi yet.*

He heard Obi-Wan's gentle, admonishing tone in his ear even as he scrambled to avoid sending a small avalanche of parts back down the pile along with him.

Willing his muscles to stay flexible and his mind focused, he balanced carefully on the durasteel and eased out one hand...

...only to see another hand appear from the other side of the heap, reaching for the same part. No doubt it was a Manikon.

He wasn't about to let one Manikon come between him and a new motivator. Anakin threw himself forward, but he miscalculated how stable his footing was. Part of the heap began to slide, taking him along with it. He felt something or someone grab his ankle.

He crashed backward, at the same time reaching out to grab at the creature holding him. He felt some fabric in his fingers and held on. Together, the two of them banged and slid down the heap. Anakin smashed against sharp objects and bumped against durasteel and chunks of ferrocrete, still furiously hanging on to the scrap of fabric while his ankle was held securely in the creature's grasp.

At last they hit bottom. Anakin wrenched his foot away and sprang to his feet, ready for battle. The other creature did the same.

The hood of the creature fell back, and Anakin found himself face-to-face with a fellow Jedi student, Tru Veld.

"What are you doing here?" Anakin hissed angrily.

"That was my part," Tru answered. "I had my hand right on it."

"I was reaching for it—"

"And thanks to you, it's lost now."

Suddenly Anakin spotted the part on the ground between them. It must have slid down along with them. He pounced on it.



## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

"It's not lost now!" he cried, grinning.

"Give that to me, Anakin," Tru said, his slanted silver eyes gleaming. Tru was a humanoid species, a native of the planet Teevan. His skin had a silvery cast, and he was tall and lanky. Teevans were exceptionally flexible and could bend in surprising ways. Anakin suddenly remembered that this quality had made Tru very good at fighting.

"I'm not afraid of you," Anakin said.

"Of course you're not," Tru said in a disgusted tone. "I'm not going to fight you for it. I'm waiting for you to do the right thing."

Anakin frowned. There were times he forgot he was a Jedi. For a moment, he had been the slave boy on Tatooine, still bound by the rules of play on that harsh world. *Those who find, keep. Those who hesitate, lose.*

He wasn't a slave boy. He was a Jedi.

"I have a Protocol Droid with a bad motivator," Anakin said. "I really need this."

But Tru wasn't listening. He was squinting into the darkness. "Now we're in for it," he said in a low tone. He signaled to Anakin. A short distance away, Anakin saw a clump of moving shapes. Manikons.

"If we're very quiet," Anakin murmured, "they won't spot us." He took a step back, and his foot kicked a piece of durasteel scrap. It landed against another piece of junk with a loud clang.

"Is that what you call quiet?" Tru hissed.

The Manikons turned. They saw the Jedi.

"Maybe if we don't move, they won't come at us," Anakin breathed.

The Manikons surged forward.

"Interesting notion," Tru said. "Got any other ideas?"

## Chapter Two

Manikons ran on four legs and reared up to two when attacking. They had blunt, heavy feet that they used to bludgeon their enemy. If they got close, they could spew a stinging venom from their eyes that had the power to temporarily blind their attacker.

There was no question that Anakin and Tru would need their lightsabers. Before the thought had completely registered, Anakin found the hilt in his hand. He didn't think it was such a good idea to reveal the fact that two Jedi were scavenging beneath the city. But he didn't particularly want to be pummeled and blinded, either.

Tru jumped to his left, and Anakin immediately saw his strategy. He wanted to avoid the pummeling feet and the stinging venom, which could only be directed straight ahead. Anakin followed Tru, leaping to engage the first Manikon. He knew he was a more aggressive fighter than Tru. He needed to avoid wounding or killing. He just had to frighten the Manikons enough to retreat.

"If we attack their bundles, they'll retreat," he told Tru confidently. "They won't want to lose what they have."

He leaped forward, going after the booty tied to their backs in large sacks. Whirling and dodging the flying feet, he slashed at

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

the straps of leather tying the bags to their backs. The maneuver required the most precise of touches. A fraction off, and he could easily slice off an arm. This was why he loved the action of a lightsaber. It was the ultimate instrument. He had seen firsthand the mistake that many Jedi students made. They did not realize how delicate it could be, how you could use it like a breath of air. *Like a feather, not a stick*, the best lightsaber teacher, Soara Antana, had said.

Three bundles fell, scattering parts, and the Manikons howled in rage. They leaped over the parts and thundered toward Anakin and Tru.

*Ffffffeenwwww!*

Anakin had never heard the sound of a Manikon spewing venom before, but he didn't need a lesson.

"Whoa, really good plan, Anakin," Tru observed.

Anakin leaped to his right as a snarling Manikon approached, rearing up on two legs. Tru rushed forward and delivered a fast series of moves to push back the Manikon.

"Okay, time," Tru said.

"Time for what?"

"New plan. Run."

"Good idea." Anakin took off after Tru.

The two of them leaped together, using the Force to help them gain the top of the junk heap in one bound. They sent a shower of debris down behind them, but they managed to keep their footing.

Below, the snarling Manikons began to scale the heap in their fury. But they were heavier and clumsier than the Jedi. The junk heap began to tumble and sway.

Anakin looked over at Tru.

"What now?"

"Jump?" Tru suggested.

"Sure. Any suggestions where?" They were surrounded by other junk heaps, all of them unstable. It was impossible to know if they would be able to land safely.

## Jude Watson

A huge Manikon was halfway up the slope when he dislodged a power converter fragment. The entire heap began to collapse.

“Anywhere!” Tru yelled, and leaped into the air.

Anakin followed. In midair, he had a second to decide on his landing spot. If he hadn’t had Jedi training, chances were good that he would have landed on a spike or sharp piece of metal. But he was able to evaluate and direct his descent, even as he fell. Everything below him was suddenly sharp, suddenly clear. He felt he could see every pebble, every grain of dirt and debris. That was how clear the Force could make his vision.

It was moments like this that he lived for. The night air, so crisp in his lungs. Danger so near. The Force around him. If he could hang in the air forever like this, he would.

He landed lightly, precisely, on the edge of a heap, then jumped the rest of the way to the ground. Beside him, Tru landed safely as well.

*Ffffffeenwwww!*

Anakin jumped, pulling Tru aside. The venom hit only millimeters away.

They looked behind them. Three furious Manikons were trying to slide down the heap toward them. Junked parts were shifting and sliding.

“Time to go,” Tru panted.

They ran. Behind them, the enormous junk heap collapsed in a cloud of dust. The cry of the Manikons was terrible. Choking, Anakin and Tru kept running. They didn’t stop until they reached the relative safety of the walkway.

They paused to catch their breath. It had been a close call.

They struck off in the direction of the lift ramp to the upper levels of Coruscant.

“Well, if you say so,” Tru said.

Anakin looked at him, confused. “If I say what?”

“Your droid has a bad motivator,” Tru explained. “What makes you think so?”

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

"The reactivate switch keeps cutting out. This is my second motivator. The first one just blew when I hooked it up. I spent two weeks rebuilding it, too."

"Then your problem isn't the motivator," Tru said. "Have you run a check on the sensory plug-in system?"

Anakin shook his head. "Nothing wrong with it."

"Maybe. But sometimes it can interface with the reactivate switch and cause the motivator to fuse. Did something funny happen with the vocabulator when the first motivator blew?"

"That's funny," Anakin said. "It went crazy. My droid started talking in Kyhhhsik."

"That's your problem, then," Tru said. "The sensor suite has a short. Sometimes in Protocol Droids it can trigger the vocabulator. It's a pretty simple problem to fix. Much more simple than a bad motivator."

Anakin glanced at Tru's tall, gangly body. Tru had never impressed him. Sometimes Anakin had wondered if his connection to the Force was strong enough to be a Jedi. Yet Tru had recently been picked as a Padawan by Ry-Gaul, a quiet and respected Jedi Knight. Anakin had wondered about that, too.

"I didn't know you knew so much about droids," Anakin said.

"I don't. I just picked up a few things along the way," Tru said. "I like to read manuals in my spare time. Droids. Transports. Circuit boards. You name it."

Anakin tossed him the motivator part. "Here. I guess I won't need this after all."

Tru tucked it into the pocket of his tunic. "Thanks."

"That is, if you're right," Anakin added.

"If I'm not, you can have the part back."

Suddenly, Anakin began to understand why Tru had been picked by Ry-Gaul. There was the sense of assurance Tru had. He gave off a sense of calm. That was unusual in a young student, even a Jedi. Anakin himself was aware that he felt confused and uncertain some of the time. He covered it well. But Tru didn't seem to have an undercurrent. He was just Tru.

## Jude Watson

"Give me a summary when you're done with the analysis," Tru said.

"Of the droid?" Anakin asked.

"Of me," Tru answered. "Aren't you analyzing me right now?"

Anakin grinned and didn't bother to deny it. "I haven't come to any conclusions yet."

Tru took a bag of sweet figda candy from his pocket and tossed one to Anakin. "Too bad living beings don't come with manuals. Listen, I'm not very mechanical, but I'll help you with your droid problem, if you want."

Anakin was surprised at the offer, but he wasn't sure why. Then he realized what it was.

It wasn't often that he was offered help.

Most assumed he didn't need it.

"Sure," Anakin said. Saying that one word opened a door. He saw that suddenly. He had forgotten it. He had once known how to make a friend, and he had made friends easily. It was a skill he had lost.

His comlink signaled, and he groaned. He knew who it was.

"Where are you?" Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin looked around. He was still quite a few levels away from the Temple. At least a few hundred. If he told his Master that, Obi-Wan would know where he'd been, and why.

Tru suddenly stepped up closer. "Master Kenobi, it is Tru Veld. Anakin is with me. I asked his help on...a personal matter. We are returning to the Temple now."

"All right." Obi-Wan sounded surprised. "Come and see me, Anakin, as soon as you arrive."

Anakin turned off his comlink. "Thanks," he said to Tru. "Obi-Wan wouldn't be happy if he knew where I'd been."

"Neither would Ry-Gaul," Tru said.

"If you're not so good at fixing droids, why were you there?" Anakin asked.

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

"I'm helping out Ali Alann," Tru said. "He has a droid helper in the nursery now. It needs a new motivator and the tech service department is running low. I thought I'd surprise him."

Anakin felt ashamed. Here he had fought for the part for himself, and Tru was doing a good deed. He sighed. It was times such as this he wondered if he'd ever become a Jedi. Students like Tru had a dedication he feared he lacked.

They hurried back to the Temple. It was dark and quiet as they checked in. They headed for the lift tube.

Obi-Wan came around the corner. He frowned when he saw Anakin's stained tunic and dirty face.

"Where have you been?" he asked sternly.

Tru and Anakin looked at each other, then began to speak at once.

"You see, Ali Alann—" Tru began.

"The tech service department has shortages—" Anakin started.

Obi-Wan held up a hand. "I don't want to know. Good night, Tru."

Tru nodded respectfully and hurried off to his quarters. Obi-Wan turned back to Anakin.

"Anakin, these late hours will do you no good if you have to leave early on a mission the next day."

"But I don't have a mission tomorrow," Anakin said.

"Ah. Are you so certain of that, young Padawan? Do you see into the minds of the Jedi Council?"

"The Jedi Council wants to see us," Anakin guessed, excitement rising in him. "You mean we have a mission?"

"We shall see," Obi-Wan said neutrally. "They've asked for our presence before dawn tomorrow. So get some sleep. If I see one yawn tomorrow, I'll forbid you to go outside the Temple grounds at all."

## Chapter Three

The next morning, Obi-Wan headed for Anakin's quarters. He knew that Anakin would be ready at the precise time he had been told. Anakin might push the rules, but he knew when to toe the line.

Anakin was waiting outside his door in a fresh tunic, his face bright with eagerness in the dim light. The glow rods were kept low at this hour to keep a meditative hush in the Temple halls. Most Jedi were asleep or meditating.

Anakin swung into step beside him. Obi-Wan knew that his Padawan was waiting for an admonishment about the night before, but Obi-Wan had already moved on. The sight of Anakin with Tru had stirred him. The two young Padawans had exchanged a conspiratorial glance, and rather than being nettled by it, Obi-Wan had enjoyed it—though he would never let Anakin know it. Perhaps Anakin had made a friend.

Obi-Wan was also glad that Anakin had an independent spirit. It would serve him well as a Jedi Knight in the years to come. What his Padawan needed was training in cooperation and dedication to the greater good, upheld by the Jedi Order. He did not know how to suppress his own needs and desires in order to serve. *How does one teach loyalty and self-sacrifice?* Obi-Wan wondered. Was it something that *could* be taught?



## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

*The mission teaches when I cannot.*

Qui-Gon's words again. Obi-Wan had come to realize that in addition to preparing him to be a Jedi Knight, Qui-Gon had prepared him to be a Master as well. He had often let him in on his thought processes, even on his own struggles to be a good Master. Qui-Gon's advice often rose in his mind, centering and calming him, much as Qui-Gon himself had done.

Over the years since Qui-Gon's tragic death, Obi-Wan had come to know how even searing grief could leave behind not only sorrow, but peace. It had been one of the great lessons of his life.

"You are thinking of Qui-Gon." Anakin's voice was soft.

Startled, Obi-Wan turned to his Padawan. "How did you know?"

"Your face. It changes." Anakin shrugged. "Some knot inside you loosens. Something smooths out. I see it happening."

"Stop being so perceptive," Obi-Wan chided gently.

"Now you are not thinking of him at all," Anakin replied, mischief in his eyes. "The knot is back."

"And you have tied it," Obi-Wan answered, accessing the Council room door.

The full Council had not yet assembled. Only Yoda and Mace Windu were present, speaking quietly by the window. The lights of Coruscant still sparkled outside. The sun had not yet risen. A few air taxis made their way down the space lanes. In only an hour or so those lanes would be crammed with traffic.

Obi-Wan was surprised to see two other Jedi Knights in the room with their Padawans. Obviously this mission was going to be a big one. He gave short bows to Ry-Gaul and Soara Antana. Ry-Gaul's Padawan was Tru Veld, Anakin's companion of the night before. The tall, elegant Master towered over his Padawan. Obi-Wan did not know Ry-Gaul very well, though he knew his reputation. He was a grave, silent Jedi who did not speak much but was widely respected for the depth of his knowledge of the galaxy. Soara Antana was a legend. Her lightsaber skills had set

## Jude Watson

her apart even as a young girl. Like Obi-Wan, she had recently become a Jedi Knight. Her Padawan, Darra Thel-Tanis, was the same age as Anakin. Darra, a slender girl with lively eyes, took her place next to the sturdy, muscular Soara.

The Jedi Council members filed in and took their places. Yoda and Mace Windu came away from the window and sat. They exchanged a glance but did not start the proceedings. What were they waiting for?

The doors hissed open again, and Siri strode in. Obi-Wan hid his smile. He should have known. When he had known Siri as a young Padawan, she had been strict about rules and regulations. But ever since she had gone undercover to trap the slave pirate Krayn, he had noticed a difference in her. She seemed a little restless, less inclined to listen wholeheartedly to the Council. Obi-Wan didn't mind the change. Siri had always seemed just a bit too inflexible. Now she even looked like a rebel. Her blond hair was cropped short, unlike the other Jedi Masters. Instead of a tunic and cloak, she wore a close-fitting unisuit made of leather. She nodded at him and took her place next to her Padawan, Ferus Olin.

Mace Windu's stern gaze swept over them all. "Thank you all for your punctuality," he said, giving Siri a pointed look that only caused her chin to lift and her lips to quirk in a small, apologetic smile. "We have an emergency mission that requires the service of four Jedi teams. You are to travel to Radnor, a planet overcome by a toxic disaster. Radnor is a small planet known for its research and development of high-tech weapons systems. A toxic cloud has been accidentally released by one of their weapons laboratories and is quickly spreading. Many have died; many more have become ill. So far the damage has been confined to one area."

"Two main city-states there are on Radnor," Yoda said. "Twin cities, they are called. Tacto and Aubendo. Small cities they are, each with their own governing ministers. Prevailing winds they have on Radnor. The winds sent the toxic cloud directly to

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

Aubendo. Confined there the toxin has been. Yet no one knows exactly how it has spread.”

“Since it is a new agent, there are many unknowns. It could be ingested into the lungs or through the skin,” Mace Windu continued. “The agent is not a gas, but an organic substance carried by the air. It could possibly be spread from one being to another—we don’t know this, either. The second city of Tacto has been spared as of yet.”

“Change the prevailing wind will,” Yoda said. “Then bring it will the toxin to the second city.”

“At first Radnor dealt admirably with the disaster,” Mace went on. “The officials mobilized quickly to meet the catastrophe. The afflicted city of Aubendo and the surrounding area was cordoned off and is now called the Isolation Sector. Tacto is known as the Clear Sector, and there have been no cases so far. But as Tacto saw how severely afflicted Aubendo became, as they saw the numbers of deaths increase so that not one being was spared, they began to panic. The governing ministers of Tacto fled the planet. Anyone who could afford to joined them. There are now no more transports left on the planet to take those who could go. Anarchy and panic have taken over. So the Senate is stepping in. Evacuation vessels capable of transporting the remaining Tacto population are headed to Radnor and will arrive in three days.”

“Surprised you look, Obi-Wan,” Yoda observed.

“Merely that the Senate has acted so quickly,” Obi-Wan said. Mired in bureaucracy, the Senate sometimes took months to debate a simple issue.

“Dire, the situation is,” Yoda said, nodding. “Bail Organa was responsible for this quick action.”

“There will be room for the sick as well as for those who haven’t been exposed,” Mace Windu went on. “But on the planet’s surface there is panic among the healthy population, for they are afraid that there will not be enough room. Corrupt lower

## **Jude Watson**

officials are taking bribes, so it is also feared that the sick will never make it off the planet at all.”

“Chaos begun cannot be ordered so easily,” Yoda said.

“You must go in and ensure that the evacuations take place in a peaceful and orderly manner,” Mace said. “There are still those who survive in Aubendo, and their places on the evacuation ships must be assured. There is looting and unrest in Tacto, so the Jedi must keep the peace as well. It is a volatile situation that means life or death for many, so we have decided that four teams are needed.”

“Transport you must medications to the sick on the planet,” Yoda added. “And leave you must this morning.”

“A Senate transport is waiting,” Mace Windu concluded. “May the Force be with you.”

## Chapter Four

The Senate transport slid into orbit around Radnor. No transports were allowed to land on the planet. They would take a small cruiser to the surface.

Anakin stared down at the planet. From space, it looked blue-green, and he knew that vast seas covered much of the surface. The main landmass was small, and appeared as though the seas around it would swallow it up.

He had visited other worlds since he'd become a Padawan. It no longer surprised him when he saw planets whose surfaces were dominated by oceans and seas. As a boy, he could not imagine seas that could stretch as far as the eye could see. On Tatooine, he had lived in an ocean of sand.

"Hard to imagine, isn't it," Tru said, breaking into his thoughts. "When you look down at a planet, I mean."

"What?" Anakin asked.

"Suffering," Tru said. "Everything seems peaceful from orbit. Then you get down there, in the middle of things, and everything changes."

"How many missions have you been on?" Anakin asked.

"Enough," Tru said softly. "Enough to have seen what I've seen. Enough to know I will see more."

## Jude Watson

It sounded like a riddle. Yet, strangely, Anakin knew what he meant. Each mission made him feel so much older. Each mission had exposed him to sadness and anger and grief. Nevertheless he looked forward to the next, and the next. That was what Tru meant.

“This is my first mission.” Darra Thel-Tanis spoke behind them. She had not said much on the journey, instead studying the research materials the Council had provided. She had lively, rust-colored eyes and a piece of bright fabric woven through her long Padawan braid. Her energy crackled. Anakin could almost feel it in the air when she was near. “So I’m depending on you two to make me look good.” Darra gave Tru and Anakin a cheerful grin.

Obi-Wan came by and put a hand on Anakin’s shoulder. “It’s time to board the cruiser.”

The four Jedi teams—Anakin and Obi-Wan, Tru and Ry-Gaul, Darra and Soara, and Ferus and Siri—made their way to the cargo bay. They settled into the cruiser and Siri took the controls.

Ferus Olin sat up front next to her, the light glinting off the streaks of gold in his thick dark hair. Anakin watched his profile. It was strictly emphasized in the Jedi Temple that no student was better than another. Different students had different gifts. Yet Ferus had them all. He was steady and brilliant, a physically gifted athlete, and popular with all the students. He was a few years older than Anakin, and the Masters were still talking about him long after he had gone on to become a Padawan.

He had excelled at everything he tried. Yet no student was jealous of him. They admired him and wanted to be like him. He was also popular with the Jedi Council. Anakin knew they expected great things of him. There was no one at the Temple who did not speak the name Ferus without praise.

Except for Anakin. There was something about Ferus he did not like. That was not appropriate, of course. It was not up to Anakin to like or dislike a student. Judgment was forbidden in the Jedi Order.

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

He tried to control the feeling. He *would* control it. He knew well that he couldn't be a Jedi without doing so.

Siri expertly maneuvered the craft down to the landing site at Tacto. She came in fast and whipped the craft around, landing with a whisper-light touch that Anakin admired. All Jedi were excellent pilots, but it was rare to find someone who approached the task as artfully as Siri.

"Great landing," Anakin told her. Obi-Wan just sighed.

Siri activated the landing ramp, and they filed down onto the surface of the planet. Ry-Gaul carried the case holding the needed medications. Anakin reached out to the Force to feel what he could about the mission ahead. He exchanged a glance with Obi-Wan. The Force was dark here. Fear had gripped the population of both cities—and with fear came desperation, anger, and chaos.

Radnorans were a humanoid species, short in stature and sturdy in appearance. Several uniformed security officers waited at the transport desk. A Radnoran dressed in a white uniconat hurried forward.

"Welcome, Jedi. We are relieved to see you. The city of Tacto is under great stress." He passed a hand over his head full of curly brown hair. "The people don't believe that there will be enough room on the ships."

"Who are you?" Soara Antana asked bluntly. She was known for her no-nonsense approach. Her powerful hands rested lightly on her belt.

"Excuse me. I should explain. I am Galen, the coordinator of the rescue effort. The officials have abandoned the planet, so I suppose I'm now in charge. Only a small security force remains. I inherited this job—I'm normally a scientist. Most of my colleagues have left. I volunteered to help with the evacuation. My sister Curi has gone to the Isolation Sector to help there." Galen turned to the security officers. "Remain here with the Jedi ship."

The lead officer nodded. "Affirmative."

## Jude Watson

“Let me take you to the emergency command post,” Galen said.

Galen started across the landing pad, taking quick steps with his short, muscular legs. “Rumors come and go daily. The ships are late. The ships are not coming. There will not be enough room. We try to keep information flowing, but it’s difficult. So many have left, and those who remain are frightened.”

“How are things in the Isolation Sector?” Soara Antana asked.

“Worse,” Galen said curtly. “Communication is erratic. The toxic cloud has apparently interfered with our comm systems. We—”

Suddenly, they heard the roar of engines. They turned just in time to see their transport lift off the landing pad and zoom high above.

Galen turned to them, his round, ruddy face suddenly pale. “The security officers stole your ship. I am so sorry. Things here are very bad. Even the officers are panicking. Why shouldn’t they? Everyone else is, and their own leader has fled. But don’t worry—I have a transport in a safe location. It is at your disposal.”

“We accept your offer with thanks,” Siri said.

“We can go there after you see the command post,” Galen said, beginning to walk again.

“We can assure your people that the ships are on their way and there is room for all. What is your biggest problem at the moment?” Obi-Wan asked.

“I have too many problems to single out one,” Galen said. “The government is practically nonexistent. The security officers—the ones who remain—are in danger of disbanding. You can see that loyalty has evaporated on Radnor.”

They exited onto a boulevard and found themselves in the city center. The streets were eerily empty. Occasionally a Radnoran would pass, walking quickly. They saw a family go by, their bundles held tightly against their chests, darting glances testifying to their panic.



## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

They passed looted stores and houses. Doors were broken down and windows were smashed. Anyone they passed had at least one blaster prominently displayed on a hip or strapped across a chest.

Anakin had never seen anything like it. He could almost smell the fear in the air.

They walked by a small space cruiser, its interior bombed out and its engine looted.

"Most of the transports that have remained have been fought over and destroyed," Galen explained. "There have been frenzied crowds desperate to get off-planet."

"Tell us about the looters," Soara said. "Do you have any clues as to who they are and where they are based?"

"No," Galen said. "I don't have time to find out. At any rate, we don't have a security force to control them. I can tell you that the raiders have somehow stolen a small army of prototype Battle Droids from a research laboratory. They use the droids to control the situation while they steal the goods."

Galen's comlink signaled, and he answered it. After exchanging a few words, he turned to the Jedi. "It is my sister, Curi. I'd like you to see this."

A miniature hologram appeared of a small Radnoran female. They could just glimpse curly dark hair like Galen's beneath the white bio-isolation suit she wore. Every inch of her body was covered, with the material stretching over her boots. A transparent mask fitted over her face and head. The hologram flickered, and some of the words were unclear.

"...three deaths today of med personnel. There aren't enough of us to take care of...We need the new medications as soon as possible. Please tell the Jedi..."

The hologram sputtered and died.

The message might have been garbled, but the controlled panic in her voice was clear.

"We should head there immediately," Soara said.

## Jude Watson

"I can take you as far as the energy gate that divides the sectors," Galen told them. "It's not far. I can supply you with bio-isolation suits."

They came to a store guarded by several Radnorans with blasters. A sign in the window announced: BIO-ISO SUITS 5,000 KARSEMS.

"Five thousand karsems is a full year's salary," Galen remarked. "We are lucky to have suits for you. They are hidden. I don't keep them at the command center, because it's already been attacked by looters looking for suits."

Suddenly, they heard the sound of screams coming from the street ahead.

Galen looked nervous. "What now?"

The Jedi did not stop to wonder. Masters and Padawans charged ahead, running toward the source of the sound.

They rounded a corner. Ahead was a large, prosperous-looking house. Its windows had been hastily covered with durasteel panels. The door had been nailed shut with thick durasteel slabs crisscrossing it.

None of the attempts to make the house a fortress had worked. The door had been kicked in. Two of the windows had the durasteel torn away. Raiders were throwing goods out of the windows.

Twenty Battle Droids like none Anakin had ever seen were wheeling in formation. They had advanced repulsorlift systems, allowing them to move with astonishing speed above the surface of the ground. While they guarded a huddled group, Radnorans systematically loaded the looted goods onto gravsleds.

One Radnoran male lay on the ground in a spreading pool of blood. A female crouched over him. Children stood nearby, rooted to the spot, while another older female tried to herd them to safety.

Anakin saw all this at once. His gaze took in the number of droids, the number of raiders, the Radnorans who must be protected, and the possible angles of attack. He knew every Jedi

## **STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice**

had observed the same. The droids had a fluid movement he'd never seen before. They did not maneuver in a jerky, programmed fashion. It was almost as though they had grace built into their sensors, and their blaster accuracy ratio was much higher than the usual Battle Droid.

One of the Radnoran raiders spotted them. Anakin saw his fingers fly on a remote device clipped to his belt. Five of the droids moved to surround the raiders for protection. The rest wheeled and came straight toward the Jedi in attack formation.

## Chapter Five

“Padawans, protection!” Siri ordered crisply. Her words floated behind her; Siri was already Force-jumping toward the front line of droids.

Obi-Wan leaped as well, keeping to Siri’s left so they could surround the droids, who were deftly moving over the ground. With one sweep of her lightsaber, Siri sliced a droid neatly in half. Simultaneously, Obi-Wan did the same to the second. On his backswing, he took out a third.

As quick and agile as Siri and Obi-Wan were, Soara Antana was even faster. Anakin watched in astonishment as her lightsaber cut through three droids with one clean stroke. Ry-Gaul handed the medication case to Tru to safeguard and joined her side.

Anakin knew that Siri’s order was for the Padawans to surround the Radnoran family that had been victimized by the attackers. But he could see that the Jedi Masters would need help with the rest of the droids and the Radnoran raiders, who were already peppering them with blaster fire.

Darra, Tru, and Ferus raced to surround the Radnoran family. Ferus took out a droid on his way in a quick detour, his red lightsaber flashing. Anakin knew the three Padawans could easily

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

follow through on Siri's order. That meant that on his way to obey Siri's order, he could help the Jedi Masters.

Anakin detoured toward Soara and Ry-Gaul. He held his lightsaber at the ready. The hilt he had built in a trance in the cave of Illum was perfectly balanced to his hand. He felt power surge through him.

Anakin took out two droids with two quick thrusts. His palms felt hot, his body strong, his timing sharp. Still, he lagged behind Ry-Gaul and the amazing Soara, whose compact body now seemed to move like molten metal, gracefully sliding from one attack position to another. Each of Soara's moves flowed into the next, with no beginning and no end. Her lightsaber was a blur as it sliced efficiently and continuously through one droid after another.

The Radnoran raiders took one look at how quickly the Jedi had reduced most of their droid squad to a smoking heap. They ran.

The rest of the droids closed in to protect the raider's retreat. Anakin saw quickly that the Jedi Masters had the situation in hand. He double-flipped back to join the other Padawans, who had formed a tight circle, their backs to the Radnoran family as they fended off the last of the blaster fire from the retreating droids.

Ferus moved aside so that Anakin could join the protective circle. Anakin kept his lightsaber moving, deflecting the fire as the family crouched behind him.

Four of the droids suddenly peeled off into one group and launched a frontal attack on Obi-Wan, taking him momentarily by surprise. Siri had to execute a reversal and come at them from behind. Anakin admired how well Obi-Wan and Siri seemed to anticipate each other's strategy in combating the droids' sudden maneuver.

That was not the only surprise. While Obi-Wan and Siri battled the group of droids, three more separated from the rest and suddenly zoomed toward the Radnoran family.

## Jude Watson

“Watch it!” Ferus called.

“I see it,” Anakin muttered, his teeth clenched. Ferus spoke as though he’d been the only one to catch the surprise attack.

Tru turned his body so that he was still protecting the Radnorans and the case in his left hand but could meet the droid attack head on. Darra switched her lightsaber from her right hand to her left. All Jedi were trained to use both hands while fighting, but Darra was especially skilled at not favoring one over the other.

Ferus stepped forward, and Anakin did the same. The two Padawans fought the three droids side by side. It took all their powers to stay ahead of them.

Anakin saw a droid come at Ferus’s left, and moved to foil its approach at the same time as Ferus. The two Padawans collided, sending Ferus off balance. He landed awkwardly, and Anakin quickly rushed in to bury his lightsaber in the droid’s control center. Ferus was up and fighting in another split second, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. He sliced a droid in two as Darra dispatched the last one with a cool grace Anakin admired.

Anakin glanced over at Obi-Wan. He was ready to join his Master, but he saw that Obi-Wan and Siri had finished off the rest of the droids. Soara and Ry-Gaul had completed their work as well.

The Jedi simultaneously deactivated their lightsabers. Obi-Wan ran to the Radnoran family.

“Is anyone badly hurt?” he asked.

“My husband,” the Radnoran female said, her eyes wide with panic. “He needs help.”

“We’ll get him to a medic,” Tru assured her.

Ry-Gaul bent over the Radnoran to gently examine the wound. “He will be all right. He needs a bacta bath.” It was rare for Ry-Gaul to say so much at once.

“My sister took a blow to the head,” the man’s wife said, pointing at the older Radnoran female.

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

“And you,” Tru said gently. He touched her shoulder. “You have taken a blow yourself, I think.”

“To the leg. It was nothing,” the wife said, kneeling by her husband.

“They all need care,” Tru said to Ry-Gaul.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said. He scanned the streets. “There are no speeder transports. No emergency med vehicles.”

As if he’d heard them, suddenly Galen appeared, piloting a large speeder. “I thought you might need this here.”

“Yes. We must transport the wounded,” Soara said. “And then we must go to the Isolation Sector.”

“I can take the wounded first, then return for you,” Galen said. “By the way, I only have four bio-isolation suits. You will have to choose who will go.”

The four Masters exchanged glances. They did not have to confer. It would be better to leave the Padawans here temporarily and not expose them to the deadly toxin. The Masters were sure to be back in time to monitor the evacuations.

“The Padawans will stay here and make sure the wounded get care,” Soara said, speaking for all the Masters. “We shall bring the medications to the Isolation Sector.”

“Your instructions are to patrol the area and keep the people as calm as possible,” Obi-Wan told the Padawans. “Do not conceal your lightsabers. The Radnorans must know that the Jedi will protect them.”

“Check in with Galen periodically,” Siri said. “He’ll keep up with the progress of the evacuations ships.”

“We will not fail you,” Ferus said.

*Of course we won’t. You don’t need to say it,* Anakin thought.

Obi-Wan drew Anakin aside. “You fought well, my young Padawan,” he told him.

“Thank you, Master.”

“But you fought for yourself,” Obi-Wan continued. “First of all, you did not obey Siri’s order at once. And when Ferus stepped forward to engage the droids, he did so in the

## Jude Watson

expectation that the two of you would work *together*. Instead, you fought as though you were fighting alone. You will never be a great Jedi warrior if you do not practice teamwork and dedicate yourself to the greater Jedi goal.”

It was his Master’s most disapproving tone. Anakin knew better than to try to defend himself. Hadn’t Ferus fought for himself, too? Hadn’t he stepped forward without consulting Anakin, without a word as to his intentions? Why was Ferus right, and he wrong?

“Yes, Master,” he said.

Obi-Wan stepped back. He never said more than he needed to. He never added a reassurance after a correction.

Anakin turned away. He caught Ferus’s eye, and the boy quickly looked away. Ferus had overheard Obi-Wan! Anakin’s face burned. Now Ferus knew that Anakin had been corrected by his Master. And Ferus was about the last Padawan in the Jedi Order that Anakin would want to know that.

The others had loaded the wounded into the speeder. There was just enough room for the Padawans.

“I’ll return for you,” Galen said to the Jedi Masters before taking off. Anakin watched as they receded behind him. He knew it was important for them to get the wounded to a medic. He also knew the Masters had left them here temporarily with important responsibilities. He still wished he were going off with his Master to see the Isolation Sector. Someday he would be a Jedi Master. Then he would be the one to make decisions, the one to make corrections. He could hardly wait.



## Chapter Six

Galen picked up the Jedi Masters and brought them to the boundary line of the Clear Sector. An energy gate was ahead.

"I'll enter the code, and you'll be able to pass through," Galen said. "I'm sorry I can't give you the transport, but no vehicle can pass through the energy gate. You'll have to put on your bio-iso suits. I've managed to get a message through to Curi. You should be met on the other side for transport to Aubendo."

"Thank you for all your help," Obi-Wan said. He gave a last look back at Tacto. Obi-Wan didn't second-guess decisions, but he suddenly wished Anakin were with him.

The Jedi donned the bio-iso suits. The energy gate blinked green, and they walked through. They stood on a vast plain. There was only a smudge of gray on the horizon, an indication of the city ahead.

After a few moments they saw a transport approaching. They recognized Galen's sister as the Radnoran female who was piloting the craft.

She halted the craft near them, the repulsorlift engines keeping it slightly aloft. "You've brought the medication?"

Ry-Gaul indicated the case at his side. "Here."

## Jude Watson

“Thank the stars. Oh, I’m so sorry. What a way to greet you. I am Curi. I extend so many thanks to the Jedi for coming. Please board the craft.”

The Jedi swung themselves into the airspeeder. As Curi took off, they introduced themselves.

“I’m in charge of the rescue operation here, such as it is,” Curi said. “We are fighting a battle we cannot win.”

“You have many fatalities?” Obi-Wan asked.

Curi gave him a bleak look, full of exhaustion and suffering. “Everyone in this sector is dead or dying. Only those who came in from the Clear Sector with bio-iso suits are healthy.”

The gray towers of the city rose before them. “We’re almost there,” Curi said. “We are passing over the underground canyons now.”

Below them, the ground was fissured with deep cracks that Obi-Wan could see led to a maze of canyons.

“Radnorans are city dwellers,” Curi explained. “We do not like open spaces. Perhaps some of us could have escaped the toxin if we weren’t all in the same place.”

They reached the outskirts of the city. Curi slowed down as they went down a wide boulevard. It was deserted. Abandoned air taxis littered the street in haphazard groups. Cafes and businesses were shuttered and empty.

There was no one on the streets. It was as though the Radnorans of this city had vanished. Obi-Wan had expected to see signs of panic, but the buildings and surroundings were intact.

Everything would have seemed almost normal, except for the fact that there wasn’t any sign of a living thing. Even the vegetation was dead. Flower beds were full of twisted stalks. A massive tree was bare of leaves, the spiky branches reaching out like pleading arms. They could see that once-flowering bushes meters tall had run down the center strip of the wide boulevard. Now dry leaves and blooms were kicked up by the wind.

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

The Jedi were silent as they viewed the eerie sight. Obi-Wan had seen civil war and environmental disaster, but this felt worse. Even in his bio-iso suit, he imagined he could smell death in the air he breathed.

Ahead they saw the large med center. Here, at least, there were signs of activity. They could see medics in bio-iso suits inside the courtyard.

Curi pulled up the speeder, and they got out. The sound of his footsteps was unsettling to Obi-Wan. Encased in the white suit, his audio perception was muffled, making everything seem not quite real.

Curi hurried over to a medic and handed over the medications. “We don’t know if these will help,” she said to the Jedi. “We are trying anything. Thank you for bringing them.”

She leaned against the wall, exhaustion showing in every line of her body.

“You need rest,” Soara said. Beneath her usual bluntness, Obi-Wan sensed real concern. He could see why. Curi looked ready to collapse.

Yet somehow Curi reached down and called up a reserve of strength. She straightened and shook her head. “There can be no rest for me. Don’t you know that? Not when I’m responsible for this.” She looked over the city again. “For all of this horror,” she whispered.

“What do you mean?” Siri asked.

“Didn’t Galen tell you?” Curi sighed. “We own a research laboratory here. I run the financial side. Galen is the scientist. The toxic emission came from our lab. We still don’t understand how it happened, though that doesn’t make us any less responsible. Galen has been working day and night on the evacuation effort. He could have left long ago.”

“And you?” Obi-Wan asked.

“I was in the Clear Sector, as was Galen, when we heard. I came here. I was trained as a medic originally. Here is where I was most needed.”

## Jude Watson

"It was brave of you to come," Soara said.

Curi pressed her lips together. "It was the least I could do."

"Have you investigated the leak at your lab?" Siri asked.

Curi shook her head. "I didn't have time to review safety procedures, so I just ordered it shut down. It was clear very quickly that we were dealing with something that moved very fast. I came back when I knew we were running out of time to help the sick. We didn't realize that the sick would turn into the dying. We had no idea what to expect. Galen was involved in weapons development, you see. He was experimenting with the toxin for a future bio-weapon. He had no idea what he had."

"What do you know about the toxin?"

"We know more about what it isn't than what it is," Curi admitted. "We know it isn't a virus. It isn't a gas, but it has been carried through the air. Somehow it is absorbed into the system, but we aren't sure how. It could be through the skin. The particles are so microscopic that even a bacta bath would not clear it all away."

"It doesn't seem that you have the same problems here that the Clear Sector does," Obi-Wan observed. "There's no sign of panic or rioting."

Curi nodded tiredly. "There was no time for panic. The dying cannot riot. Those who couldn't make it here to the med center are dying in their homes. I make the rounds. I do what I can. That is very little."

"What other kind of help can we give you?" Siri asked.

"You have brought the medicine. That was a great help. Perhaps you could patrol the city and find out how many still need help. I haven't been able to get to every dwelling. You can help us organize. People will listen to you. Once the ships arrive, they will have more advanced med care. We might be able to save a few. You have to give them hope, at least." Curi's voice faltered.

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

Obi-Wan nodded, then turned to the others. "We should split into two teams. We can call two of the Padawans here, and two Masters can return to the Clear Sector."

Ry-Gaul nodded.

"We might be able to move another team back after we accomplish something here," Soara said as Siri nodded in agreement.

Curi looked from one Jedi to the other. "But you can't return."

"What?" Soara asked.

"Didn't Galen tell you? Once you cross over to the Isolation Sector, no one is allowed to return. It is forbidden. Until we know that you're not carrying the toxin back on your skin or clothes, we can't risk it."

"We're wearing bio-isolation suits," Siri said.

"Yes, but you can't wear them back to the Clear Sector," Curi explained. "The toxin may now be on your suit. Even if you remove it, some residue on the suit may touch your skin. Until we know how much of the toxin is needed to cause the epidemic, we can't let you return." She looked at them helplessly. "I'm sorry. I thought you knew. When the evacuation ships arrive, you will be able to undergo bio-cleansing aboard ship. Then I imagine there will be a quarantine period. We don't have the facilities here."

Obi-Wan looked at the other Jedi Masters. Curi's news was exasperating, but Jedi did not waste time on such emotions. He knew that, like him, they were all thinking of what to do next.

"We should contact our Padawans with more detailed instructions," Soara spoke crisply.

"They will have to handle any problems in Tacto," Siri said. "Perhaps we should contact the Jedi Council and ask for an additional Jedi team, or maybe two."

"By the time they arrive, the evacuation ships will be here," Obi-Wan said. "The Padawans will have to handle things on their own."

## Jude Watson

He could see that none of them liked this prospect. Some of the Masters had not had their Padawans very long. It made him uneasy to think of Anakin in an unstable situation without him. But there was no other solution.

Obi-Wan activated his comlink. He was relieved when he heard Anakin's voice. He knew the communication between the two sectors could be difficult. That would be another problem.

"We have a problem here," he told Anakin. "We are unable to return to the Clear Sector. You and the rest of the Padawans will have to manage that aspect of the mission."

"I see," Anakin said neutrally.

"The safety of the population is your first priority," Obi-Wan said. "Establish safety patrols to keep the peace. Try to keep misinformation from spreading. Coordinate with Galen as to the evacuation schedule. Avoid using violence, and take no lives."

"Yes, Master."

"Now, as for details," Obi-Wan began, but suddenly, the communication was cut off. When he tried to contact Anakin again, he could not reach him. Obi-wan hid his frustration as he tucked his comlink back in his belt.

"They'll be fine," Siri said. "I trust Ferus. He's been on many missions."

"And I trust Anakin," Obi-Wan agreed. Still, a small voice inside him hoped that Anakin would be able to work well with the other Padawans without his watchful eye.

"We'll try again later," Soara said. "In the meantime, we should split into teams."

Obi-Wan glanced at Siri, and she nodded. There were many times that they had clashed in the past. But that did not matter. They had worked together before and knew each other's rhythms.

"Obi-Wan and I will begin to search the city for more of the sick," Siri said.

"We'll take the north sector," Obi-Wan said. "We need to compile lists so that we can assure there is space for everyone."

## **STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice**

We must make sure all the sick are evacuated. We'll check in when we can."

Ry-Gaul nodded.

"May the Force be with you," Soara said.

"May the Force be with you," Obi-Wan and Siri repeated. Then they turned toward the eerie emptiness of the city and began their walk toward death.

## Chapter Seven

The Padawans had just left the med center when Obi-Wan contacted Anakin. They had remained to make sure that the Radnoran father would be all right. They had questioned the family, but no one knew the raiders. They had arrived out of nowhere. Other families in the neighborhood had been hit, too, so they'd been worried that they would be attacked. But there was no way to defend themselves against the prototype droids.

The four Padawans paused on the outside of the med center. Suddenly, they felt very alone.

"I spend half my time impatient to be a Jedi Knight," Darra said finally. "Now all I want is to be a Padawan. I wish Soara were here." She reached into the pocket of Tru's tunic and withdrew the bag of candy he kept there. She popped a piece of figda in her mouth and chewed furiously.

"We'll do fine," Anakin said confidently.

"No stress," Ferus agreed. The expression in his dark eyes was serene. "Among all of us, we've been on enough missions to handle this."

"How should we start?" Tru asked. "Did they want all of us to go on safety patrols? Or should one team coordinate with Galen on the evacuation?"



## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

“Obi-Wan didn’t say,” Anakin answered. “But if you ask me, safety patrols won’t accomplish much if we don’t flush out the raiders.”

“Hold it,” Ferus said. “That would be overstepping our instructions.”

“We’ve received no clear directions,” Anakin pointed out. “The communication cut out. We know our first priority is the safety of the citizens, and we can’t possibly accomplish that with safety patrols alone.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Ferus said.

Darra looked from Anakin to Ferus. “Excuse me. I don’t want to interrupt, but I just wanted to point out that there are two other Padawans here. Do we get a vote?”

“Sure you get a vote,” Anakin said. “As long as you agree with me.” He smiled to let her know he was kidding.

“What do you have in mind?” Tru asked Anakin. “Let’s discuss the plan first, then vote on it.”

“It would be much more fun to stand here arguing,” Darra said.

“I say we split into teams,” Anakin said. “One team can conduct safety patrols. The other can work on finding the headquarters of the raiders.” He knew very well that he wasn’t going to be on the team conducting safety patrols. He and Tru would go after the raiders.

“How?” Ferus asked. “We don’t have the resources to comb the whole city.”

“We don’t have to. I have an idea,” Anakin declared. “Even a Prototype Droid would have a homing device. All we have to do is take one of the droids we deactivated and tap into it.”

“Do you know how to do that?” Darra asked.

“Sure,” Anakin replied.

“It can’t be that easy,” Darra said.

Anakin grinned. “I didn’t say it was easy. I said I could do it.”

## Jude Watson

“Hold on a second,” Tru said. “These are Battle Droids. Most likely they undergo an automatic memory wipe if they are captured or deactivated.”

“There isn’t a memory wipe that I can’t get around,” Anakin said confidently. “The homing device is coded into the main sensor suite. I can find it. If we revive a droid, it will lead us straight to the headquarters.”

Darra shrugged. “It’s worth a try.”

Tru nodded. “All right. I say we go after the headquarters.”

“Then it’s decided,” Ferus said. “Though I don’t think we should split into teams. If Anakin is successful and we do find the headquarters, no doubt there will be more of those Prototype Droids. Too many for one team to handle.”

Privately, Anakin thought that he and Tru could handle the droids, but he nodded. “All right.” Obi-Wan had given him a warning that he must cooperate, respecting Jedi values. Anakin took that seriously.

They headed back to the Radnoran family home. The fallen droids still littered the grounds. Anakin found one that was mostly intact. It had lost its arms and its artillery control panel had fused, but the main sensor suite wasn’t too badly damaged.

Anakin removed his utility kit from his belt and went to work. He opened the sensor suite panel. Tru bent over to look.

“Standard, except for those circuits,” he said, pointing. “I remember seeing a manual regarding the OOM-9 Battle Droid. This looks similar.”

Anakin was grateful for Tru’s photographic memory. Some of the circuitry was new to him. He pointed to a tightly packed array of multicolored wires by the sensory input cable. “Do you remember which wire goes with what?”

“The green are for locomotion. The white connect to artillery devices. See how they fused and shorted? The blue are for passive-mode sensors. And I think these cables here are part of the signal receiver assembly.”

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

"I bet the homing device is connected somehow," Anakin murmured.

"It's a good place to start," Tru agreed.

Darra seemed interested in their progress, but Anakin could feel Ferus's impatience behind him. He tried to screen it out as he worked.

"I've got it!" Anakin said at last. "I reconnected the homing device to the locomotion sensor through the sensory plug-in. If I turn it on, the droid should head back to its origin point."

"Let's give it a try," Tru said.

"Remind me to get you guys the next time my comlink malfunctions," Darra said. "You'd probably rebuild it into a cargo lifter."

"We'll have to move fast to keep the droid in sight," Ferus said. "Is everyone ready?"

When he saw everyone nod, Anakin switched on the droid. They stepped back as it beeped and checked circuits. Then suddenly it wheeled around and fired its repulsorlift engines, taking off down the boulevard.

The four Padawans had to race to keep it in sight. They flew down the streets of the city, occasionally Force-jumping past obstacles. They quickly passed through the neighborhood of fine homes, raced through a commercial district, and then found themselves outside a small warehouse. The droid hovered outside for a moment, its head rotating. The Padawans dived behind a wall.

They watched as the droid accessed a control panel hidden behind what appeared to be a sheer wall. A door slid open, and the droid disappeared inside.

Anakin leaped forward and shoved his lightsaber hilt between the closing door and its frame. The door stayed open a fraction. With Tru, Ferus, and Darra, he pushed it open the rest of the way. The Padawans slid inside.

It was a gloomy interior. At first they could see or hear little. Anakin concentrated. He detected the sound of voices. He

## Jude Watson

motioned to the others. When their eyes had adjusted to the light a few moments later, they could see that the warehouse was full of items they could only assume were stolen. Rich tapestries and rugs were rolled and rested against the walls. Silver and intricate metalwork objects were stacked on shelves. Anakin saw gold peggats and aurodium ingots heaped in a corner. Durasteel bins were no doubt filled with more valuables.

The voices were coming from around the corner. It was the raiders.

The Padawans crept closer. Now they could make out words.

"The bloc between Evermore and Acadi is first. Then from Acadi to Montwin. We can easily clear out the two blocs using what we have."

"Sure we can clear them, but where will we put our stash? We need more storage."

"That's one problem I'm happy to have."

The sound of soft laughter came to the Padawans.

"They'd better come through on their promise to move all this stuff—"

The voice broke off as an insistent beep began to sound. It played through several coded sequences.

Anakin heard the sound of chairs scraping. "It's the droid," someone said in a low tone. "That's the activation signal for tampering. Someone might be here." The voices fell silent. Anakin could just make out a whisper of movement, and then stillness.

"Activation signal for tampering?" Darra whispered.

Anakin and Tru exchanged a look. "I guess it's in case the homing device is activated by someone other than the programmer," Anakin explained.

"*Easy*, you said," Darra whispered. "What should we do now?"

"Defend ourselves!" Anakin exclaimed as the raiders suddenly raced around the corner, blasters in hand.

## Chapter Eight

They had been ordered to take no lives. Somehow they would have to deflect blaster fire and capture the raiders without harming them.

As Anakin swung his lightsaber in a blur, deflecting fire, he realized for the first time that they had overlooked something.

If they caught the raiders, what would they do with them?

There weren't enough security officers to guard the criminals. The Jedi were now the backbone of the security force on the planet. If they watched the raiders, who would patrol the city?

*The present moment is the crucial moment.*

*Yes, Master.* Anakin gritted his teeth. He advanced toward the raiders. One thing at a time. The raiders were endangering the citizens and must be stopped. The Padawans would figure out what to do with them when the time came.

One of the raiders must have activated some droids, for suddenly they appeared. They wheeled into battle formation and came at the Padawans.

Anakin at first felt confident that he could defeat the droids. He had not fully realized how much he had depended earlier on the Jedi Masters. Within moments he saw that they would have a hard time winning this battle.

## Jude Watson

He hated to admit it. Ferus had been right. He and Tru could not have handled these droids by themselves.

The raiders maneuvered the droids to come between them and the Jedi. Then they disappeared. Too occupied with the attacking droids, the Padawans could not follow.

“We’ve got to stay together!” Ferus shouted. “Don’t let them separate us.”

Ferus was right again. As one unit, they could defeat fifteen droids. The Padawans kept close together, attacking and retreating, trying to pick up on one another’s unfamiliar rhythms. Anakin lost himself in the battle. There was only the smell of the smoking droids, the blur of his lightsaber, the balance and heft of it in his hand. He saw everything at once—the position of each Padawan, the attack pattern of each droid, the moves they would make next. His focus was complete. He sliced through one droid, then pivoted and buried his lightsaber in another droid’s control panel.

Ferus dived and came up underneath a droid, halving it down the middle. Tru whirled and kicked one droid while cutting off the legs of another. Darra seemed to be everywhere, her lightsaber in constant motion as she took out one droid, then another. She always landed exactly where she’d planned, ready to launch another attack or defend her fellow Padawans. Her face never registered effort, only concentration. She had learned well from Soara Antana.

At last the droids lay in heaps around them. The Padawans all slumped to the floor, exhausted. They missed their Masters.

“We still might be able to track the raiders,” Anakin said, panting. He started to rise. “Let’s go.”

“Wait.” Ferus put a hand on his sleeve. “If we run off, we could lose a precious opportunity.”

“For what, droid repair?” Anakin asked.

“Information. It’s more important than the raiders themselves. What will we do with them when we get them, anyway?” Ferus asked. “Better to head them off another way. We

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

have more important tasks. Once the evacuation starts, we'll be needed."

"That could be a waste of time," Anakin argued. "We could catch the raiders if we follow them now. I want to show Obi-Wan that I can handle a complicated mission."

"You mean you want to help the planet," Ferus said pointedly.

Anakin felt his face grow hot. Of course Ferus was right. Ferus gave the correct Jedi response. Anakin's first concern should be the people of Radnor, not his need to impress Obi-Wan. He had just expressed himself badly. He had blurted out what was in the back of his mind, not what was in the front of it. He wished he wouldn't keep running into the fact that Ferus took a more Jedi approach to action.

"What are you thinking, Ferus?" Darra asked curiously.

"We need to examine this hideout," Ferus said. "I have a feeling it has something to teach us."

"What can it teach us?" Anakin asked. "That the raiders like riches?"

Darra ignored Anakin. "Remember what we heard? Evermore and Acadi and Montwin are probably street names. They're not just striking randomly. They have a plan."

Ferus nodded. "If we can figure out their plan, we can be ahead of them instead of behind them."

"There's got to be a datapad here somewhere," Tru said, rising. "They left too fast to destroy their records."

Anakin trailed after the others. His whole body itched to follow the raiders. He always felt more comfortable in physical activity. He always ached to move. But he hoped he was wise enough to realize when it was better to wait. He just wasn't crazy about the fact that Ferus was the one to suggest it.

He knew what Obi-Wan would say. It didn't matter who suggested it. The outcome was the goal. Resentment was ego. He knew all this, but it did not chase the resentment away.

*You can feel the emotion, Obi-Wan would say. Just let it go.*

## Jude Watson

Anakin gritted his teeth. *I'm trying, Master.*

"Over here!" Darra called. "I found their holofiles."

The files had been concealed in a durasteel bin just like countless others that lined the walls.

"How did you find them?" Anakin asked.

Darra was already accessing the files. "I figured that they had been consulting the files while they were talking. The slight delay before they came to attack us meant they were concealing them. They had to be nearby."

"Good thinking," Tru said admiringly.

The Padawans bent over the files. Darra expertly accessed one after the other.

"These are lists of assets held by individual families," Anakin said. "How could they have gotten them?"

"Look at these notations," Tru said. "They're coded ECC."

"Emergency Command Center," Darra murmured.

"These files were drawn up so that if the entire planet had to be evacuated, there would be records of what Radnorans left behind," Tru said. "That way they could recover everything later."

"So the raiders must have stolen these files," Ferus added.

"Or bribed someone on the evacuation team to hand them over," Darra said. "Look at this. This is what they were talking about. They have a list of how the evacuation is going to take place. The first group to be evacuated will be from the bloc between Evermore and Acadi. As soon as those families evacuate, the raiders will move in and clean them out."

Tru gave a low whistle. "That's some organized system. But why are they looting now?"

"Easy answer?" Darra shrugged. "Because they can."

Anakin nodded. "The city is falling apart, and they see an opportunity. But are they counting on coming back to the planet for this stuff, or do they have plans to take it with them? It would be hard to smuggle it aboard the evacuation ship. The families are only allowed what they can carry."



## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

Tru reached around his head with one flexible arm to scratch his ear thoughtfully. “The raiders said something about ‘they’ had better come through on their promise to move the stuff. Who’s ‘they’?”

“Maybe they have a contact who will help them smuggle it,” Ferus said, frowning.

Darra looked up at them, her face tinged blue by the light cast by the holofile. “The important thing is that they have access to all the evacuation orders. That means someone on the inside is helping them.”

“Well, at least we know exactly what to do next,” Anakin said. “We have to find out who.”

He looked over at Ferus. He expected his fellow Padawan to argue, but Ferus nodded.

“And *why*,” Ferus added. “That might be the most important question of all.”

## Chapter Nine

It wasn't hard work, Obi-Wan told himself. It was just heartbreaking.

He and Siri moved through a landscape that reminded him of a desert moon. Yes, there were buildings. Homes. Businesses. Shops. But the eerie absence of lives being lived made the city a vast echo of sorrow.

They found the dead and they found the still-living. They brought the sick to the overcrowded med center, where medication only slowed the process of dying. Curi had had hopes that the medication could effect some cures, but so far it had not. The toxin did not respond.

Every so often Obi-Wan and Siri would see Ry-Gaul and Soara on their rounds. The four Jedi would simply nod at one another. There was nothing to say. No notes to compare. There was only death and the dying.

On their last trip to the med center, Siri watched as Obi-Wan deactivated his comlink after another unsuccessful effort to contact Anakin. "You seem worried," she said.

Obi-Wan thought carefully how to reply. He didn't want Siri to think he didn't trust Anakin. How could she understand? Her Padawan was Ferus, who Obi-Wan knew as an assured, steady

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

Jedi student. No one understood his brilliant, openhearted, complex Padawan like he did.

*So yes, I'm worried, Obi-Wan thought. But I will only admit that to myself. I don't worry that Anakin will fail. Or that he will let down the Order. But that he will try too hard. That he will go too far. That he will assume he can do what he cannot.*

"I'd rather he was by my side," he said. "That's all."

Siri nodded, her clear blue eyes holding a hint of skepticism. She knew he was not telling her the complete truth. Obi-Wan turned away. Sometimes old friends were hard to have around.

Suddenly, Curi hailed them from the steps of the med center. Her eyes were red-rimmed behind her bio-iso mask.

"The ambassador from Avon wishes to speak with you," she said. "His name is Dol Heep. He was trapped here when he entered shortly before the toxin release. He wore a bio-iso suit so hasn't been affected, but he can't leave. He has a proposal."

"Avon is a planet in your system," Obi-Wan said. He remembered that the planet was only a day's journey away.

Curi nodded. "He is waiting for you. You can use my office."

They followed Curi's directions to a small, cluttered office. Sleep mats were rolled up and stacked in the corners. Containers of food were scattered on a long table. Obviously the medics used the office to snatch quick meals and some rest when they could.

Dol Heep rose when they entered. He was a tall being with a large, domed head. He was dressed in a bio-iso suit, though for some reason he had attached his ornate septsilk cloak to it, which gave him a slightly ridiculous air.

He bowed. "A great honor to meet Jedi." His voice boomed out, sounding too loud in the hushed setting.

Siri and Obi-Wan returned the bow.

"Unfortunate that it is under such circumstances," Dol Heep continued. "No one in the government is available for us to speak with. Jedi are the only officials we can approach with this offer."

## Jude Watson

“Yes?” Siri asked, inclining her head politely.

“Avon grieves at the tragic accident that has befallen our neighbor,” Dol Heep said in a slightly lowered tone, his prominent eyes staring at them from behind his mask. “We heard that there might not be enough room on the evacuation ships for everyone here.”

“That is a rumor,” Obi-Wan said. “It is false.”

“So you say. In case of some failure, Avon wishes to send an entire fleet to Radnor to airlift more sick off-planet. We took the liberty of sending the fleet already. Once in orbit, we’ll await orders. Of course, we’ll need Jedi help here on the ground to coordinate the rescue effort.”

“That is a kind and generous offer,” Obi-Wan said. “But there is no need for Avon to commit a fleet of vessels. There is enough space on the ships being sent by the Senate.”

“This information does not seem to have been accepted by the citizens of Radnor,” Dol Heep said. “Appearance is often reality. If more ships are said to be arriving, the people will be more calm.”

Dol Heep had a point. Even the rumor of another rescue fleet could calm the population. But Obi-Wan felt uneasy. He wasn’t about to accept the offer until he knew more. He gave a quick glance to Siri. He could see the same doubt in her eyes.

“We will get back to you,” he said.

“My planet appreciates your consideration,” Dol Heep said. With another bow, he left the room.

Obi-Wan turned to Siri. “What do you think?”

“There’s something about this that isn’t right,” Siri said. “I just have a feeling about it.” Her blue eyes gleamed at him in a way he hadn’t seen since they’d arrived on Radnor. There hadn’t been much call for Siri’s quick wit. “I trust my instincts, but you know how I occasionally like to back them up with facts.”

“Until we have facts, let’s hold off, then,” Obi-Wan agreed. “We should investigate the offer further.”

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

Curi poked her head in the room. “Are you finished? I have some medics who need to eat or they’ll collapse.”

“Tell them to come in,” Siri said. “What do you know about Dol Heep, Curi?”

Curi tried to scratch her scalp through her bio-iso suit. “Not much. But what I know I don’t trust. Radnorans don’t trust the Avoni. They are aggressive colonizers. I made it a rule not to do business with them. I wouldn’t sell them weapons. Of course, there are many others, even on Radnor, who will.” Her face changed. “There *were* many others,” she added softly.

“Avon has offered a fleet of evacuation ships for Radnor,” Obi-Wan told her. “I don’t feel we should take the offer at face value.”

Curi looked puzzled. “What are you getting at?”

“For one thing, the offer could be a smokescreen for a planned takeover,” Siri said.

Curi frowned. “Why would Avon want to take over a planet where you can’t breathe the air?”

“A good point,” Obi-Wan said. “Maybe Avon doesn’t want to colonize Radnor. But they might be planning a temporary occupation. There are many tech labs on Radnor that can be plundered for data. Sometimes data can be more important than land.”

Curi just looked tired. “I can’t worry about this. I have sick people to take care of.”

Siri put a gloved hand on her shoulder. “We will handle it.”

Curi nodded and left. Obi-Wan and Siri headed out of the med center. He hoped it would not be a waste of time to investigate the Avoni.

The offer seemed a simple offer of help from a neighbor. But he had been on enough missions to know that there were veils behind veils, where somewhere the truth would lie.

## Chapter Ten

The Padawans were heading into the Emergency Command Center when Ferus held up a hand. The Padawans stopped. Anakin nearly bumped into Darra. Annoyed, he stepped back.

“Before we meet with Galen, I suggest that only one Padawan conduct the questioning,” Ferus said. “We don’t want him to think we are accusing or bullying him. This should be done carefully.”

“You should do it, Ferus,” Darra said. “You have the most experience.”

Ferus nodded. “All right.”

*Wait a second. Don’t I get a vote?* Anakin wondered. What happened to Jedi cooperation?

But Tru was agreeing as well, so Anakin nodded.

Ferus led the way into the room, which had been a minister’s office before all the government officials had fled the planet. Now a row of datascreeens glowed faintly as Galen sat on a repulsorlift chair, moving from screen to screen as he checked and matched lists.

“How is the evacuation coming?” Ferus asked politely as they entered.

Galen passed a harried hand through his hair. “All right. There are so many details. And I don’t have much help.”

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

“We’d be glad to assist you,” Ferus said. “How many workers do you have here?”

“Just me at the moment,” Galen said. “I had a staff, but they all left when the ministers did.” He gave the Padawans an impatient glance. “I can handle things here. You go ahead and keep patrolling the streets, or whatever you’re doing.” He turned back to the datascreens, dismissing the Padawans as though they were naughty children who had interrupted his work.

“Can you tell us who has access to this information?” Ferus asked. Anakin was surprised at his polite tone. How could he let Galen get away with patronizing them?

“The upper ministers of government had access,” Galen answered without turning. “And now I do. Why?”

“Is there anyone who would release that information?” Ferus asked.

Galen gave a weary sigh and turned around in his chair. “No, of course not,” he said. “It’s classified. Sensitive. If people knew in what order they would be evacuating, violence could erupt. The people at the bottom of the list will try to push themselves forward. I won’t post the lists until immediately before the ships arrive.” Galen looked at the Jedi curiously. “If there is something wrong, you must tell me. I am in charge of the city’s security. I don’t want the job, but I’m the only qualified one left.”

“I’m afraid we have reason to believe that the raiders have information about the evacuation,” Ferus answered. “We believe they are planning to plunder the homes of those who are leaving the planet.”

Galen looked at them sharply. “Are you sure about this?” At Ferus’s nod, he shook his head. “Still, at least they will have their lives.”

“But they will return to nothing,” Darra said.

“If we *can* return.” Galen looked away. “I have a feeling our beloved planet is lost to us for good.”

“You don’t know that,” Ferus said. “The toxin could have a half-life.”

## Jude Watson

"We don't have time to investigate that," Galen snapped. "Don't you think we have enough to do?"

"We are not accusing you," Ferus said politely.

"Maybe not. But you are wasting my time. I am trying to save lives here." Galen waved at the datascreen.

"We need to find out who passed the information along," Anakin said in a forceful tone. He was tired of letting Ferus ask all the questions. He was getting nowhere with that polite tone. "Whoever it was wanted to foster instability on the planet. I don't call investigating that a waste of time. Do you?"

"Hey, there's no reason to jump down my throat, kid." Galen held up two hands, as if to fend Anakin off. "Look, I'd like to help. But there's really no way to tell who passed on the information. Many of the ministers have gone to Coruscant. Some have scattered to other worlds to wait out the catastrophe in comfort." He frowned at them. "You're not thinking of leaving now that you've lost your Masters, are you?"

"We haven't lost them," Anakin snapped.

Ferus interrupted smoothly. "No, we're not leaving. We're to remain until the evacuations take place. Don't worry. And we've destroyed many of the Prototype Droids that the raiders were using."

"You kids did?" Galen looked impressed. "Maybe things are looking up." Suddenly the communicator sputtered to life. It crackled and buzzed, but they could hear a voice calling for Galen to answer.

He quickly adjusted the chair to swing over to the comm unit. "Galen here. Galen here. Do you read? Do you read?"

"Ships...evacuation...engine shutdown needs repair..." The words came out in bursts of static. "Delay. Do you copy?"

"The ships are delayed? How long?" Galen asked desperately. "How long?"

But the comm unit went dead.

Galen turned to the Padawans. His face was pale. "That was the communication line of the Senate ship. Even a short delay



## **STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice**

will be fatal. The winds will shift in twelve hours. Without those ships, we're dead."

## Chapter Eleven

In the Isolation Sector, the Jedi Masters met outside the med center to check in. Soara and Ry-Gaul were also hesitant about Dol Heep's offer.

"The planet is extremely vulnerable now," Soara said. "One day the survivors will want to return, if they can. They should return to intact homes and businesses."

"This will take further study," Siri said soberly.

Ry-Gaul nodded.

Just then Curi hurried out of the building. "I've received a communication from the evacuation ships. It wasn't very clear, but I do know this—the ships have been delayed. How long, I don't know."

The Jedi exchanged glances. Obi-Wan reached for his comlink and tried to contact Anakin. He was unsuccessful. He jammed it back into his belt with unnecessary force. Siri glanced at him, then turned back to the others.

"Now we must take Dol Heep's offer seriously," Siri said worriedly. "Lives are at stake."

"The prevailing winds will shift in twelve hours," Obi-Wan said. "We have to make a decision very soon."

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

“By the way, we encountered something interesting,” Soara said. “We found someone who has been unaffected by the toxin.”

Curi’s worried expression changed to intent curiosity. “What do you mean?”

“A Radnoran named Wilk sneaked back into the Isolation Sector to see his wife two days ago. He didn’t have a bio-iso suit. His wife died, but he is completely healthy.”

“He has no symptoms at all?” Curi asked. “Are you sure?”

“We brought him here,” Soara told her. “We were just about to look for you.”

“We must study him,” Curi said, her voice rising with excitement. “He could have some sort of built-in immunity. This could help us.” She frowned. “I only have a few researchers here. My scientific skills are rusty, but we need to investigate this.”

“There isn’t much time,” Obi-Wan told her.

For the first time since they’d met her, Curi smiled. “Then I’d better get started.”

She turned and rushed back into the building.

A voice suddenly boomed out from behind them. “Jedi! Glad to find you here.”

It was Dol Heep. The Jedi bowed to him politely.

“You haven’t been back to speak to us as you promised,” Dol Heep said. “We don’t understand this lack of courtesy.”

“We have been busy with the sick,” Siri said.

“You should be busy working to get them off-planet,” Dol Heep said in a chiding tone. “Our planet has made a great and generous offer, and still you ignore us. Now we hear that the evacuation ships have been delayed. And you *still* don’t come to us?” Dol Heep’s skin was mottled with anger. “We deserve this treatment? If you do not allow our fleet to land, the Senate shall hear about it!”

“We were just coming to see you, Dol Heep,” Obi-Wan said in a polite tone, even though he was nettled at the ambassador’s rudeness. “We accept your offer of help.”

## Jude Watson

It was a decision he'd made reluctantly. But Siri was right. Lives were at stake. The Jedi would just have to ensure that the Avoni were not planning a takeover of the famed Radnoran research labs. Though how they would do that, he didn't know. The Senate ships could be delayed for days. It was more than time enough for the Avoni to raid the labs.

"More like it, we say," Dol Heep said, satisfied. "We will give the order for the ferry ships to land in both sectors. We will load the citizens onto skiffs in the cities, then bring them to the ferry ships, which will transport them to the orbiting ships. Then we'll bring them to Coruscant. You see? We give all our resources to our friends the Radnorans."

Dol Heep hurried off, his septsilk cloak swishing with his lurching walk.

"I hope we don't come to regret this," Soara said.

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "But it seems the only decision to make under the circumstances."

Siri withdrew her comlink from her utility belt. She punched out the coordinates for Ferus. To everyone's surprise, they heard Ferus's voice clearly.

"Yes, Master."

"Ferus! We have received word that the evacuation ships have been delayed—"

"We know this. And Master—"

"One minute, Ferus," Siri interrupted. "This is important. Avoni ships will be here in a matter of hours. They will transport the population to ships orbiting the planet. Then they'll be taken to safety. There is no need for panic. Did you copy that?"

"Yes, Master. But we fear that someone has—"

Static overcame the line, and it went dead.

The Masters exchanged uneasy glances.

"He sounded worried," Obi-Wan said.

"Yes," Siri agreed quietly. "He did."

"Something is wrong in Tacto," Soara murmured. "I can feel it. But I don't have a clear sense of it."

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

The Jedi Masters exchanged glances. They all felt the same.

"I agree," Siri said. "We can only trust that our Padawans are able to handle it."

The usually composed Soara looked uncertain. "This is Darra's first mission."

"Ferus has experience with difficult situations," Siri said. "And the others look up to him."

*Not Anakin*, Obi-Wan thought. He had sensed Anakin's dislike of Ferus. It hadn't worried him. Anakin would naturally feel rivalries with other Padawans at this age. As he matured as a Jedi, he would outgrow them. Once, Obi-Wan had felt the same about Siri. Now he valued her friendship.

Anakin was still young. Without Obi-Wan there to guide him, would Anakin allow his strong will to bend with the needs of the group? Would his dislike of Ferus spill over into open conflict? The nagging doubts would not go away.

"They are all excellent Padawans, each in their own way," Soara said confidently. "Together they are even stronger."

"But they are not Jedi," Ry-Gaul said softly. "Not yet."

And somehow these gentle words from a Jedi who rarely spoke summed up everything they felt. And everything they feared.

## Chapter Twelve

*Ferus was right. Ferus was always right. Except when he was wrong.*

Anakin hurried along the streets of Tacto with the others. News of the delay of the evacuation ships had leaked out. Security officers had called for help. A riot had broken out in the last remaining shop to sell bio-isolation suits. While he raced along with the others, Anakin's mind was busy furiously reviewing the scene with Galen. Ferus's too-respectful questioning had gotten them nowhere. As soon as Anakin began to make some headway, Ferus had interrupted.

"You handled Galen well back there," Darra said to Ferus. "I don't think I could have held my temper."

"It does us no good to make him angry," Ferus said. "He is still a source of information for us."

Anakin snorted. "Some source. He didn't tell us anything. He treated us like kids. And you let him get away with it."

Ferus glanced down and gave him a cool look as he kept up his easy, loping stride. Anakin wished he weren't so tall. "He didn't tell you anything, either."

"He was about to," Anakin shot back.

"So you can see into the future," Ferus said. "Hmmm. That's very unusual for a Padawan."

Anakin flushed angrily as Darra giggled.

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

"As long as we keep our lightsabers sheathed," Tru spoke up suddenly. The three Padawans looked at him. "We can handle the riot peacefully," he explained.

Now they could hear the roar of the crowd ahead. They picked up their pace and raced to the spot.

Blasters had been drawn. Radnorans lay bleeding on the streets. More pushed to get inside the store. Bio-iso suits had been torn to shreds by competing Radnorans. Over a voice amp system, the shop owner was desperately attempting to quiet the crowd.

"There are no more suits!" he cried. "No more suits! Go home! The shop is empty!"

"We need to get to the voice amp," Anakin said.

"Keep your lightsabers sheathed," Ferus warned. "We can handle this peacefully if we keep calm."

Ferus was giving orders again. Anakin turned away and tried to push his way through the crowd. Darra and Tru joined Ferus in breaking up fights and trying to calm the crowd. It was difficult to do this without hurting anyone. At first the Radnorans were furious at the Jedi. They had to dodge blows as they sought to calm tempers.

Anakin made his way to the frightened owner. "I must use your voice amp," he told him. "I can calm the crowd."

The owner handed him the amp. "Be my guest."

Anakin spoke clearly into the amp system. "The Avoni have pledged a fleet of ships to airlift the citizens off-planet. They are achieving orbit now. There is room for all. Everyone will be evacuated before the winds shift."

A few Radnorans closest to the amp heard the message and began to talk among themselves. Anakin repeated the message. Gradually, the crowd began to settle down.

"Where do we report to? How will this be handled?" someone called.

## Jude Watson

"The evacuation team will alert each of you where and when to show up," Anakin announced. "But that means you must return to your homes."

Slowly the crowd began to disperse. The crisis was averted. But the owner's business had been completely destroyed. The battered sign reading BIO-ISO SUITS 5,000 KARSEMS swung crazily in the stiff breeze.

"It almost serves him right for charging so much," Darra said as a last burst of wind sent the sign crashing to the street.

"I wish communication were better with our Masters," Tru said. "They will know when and how the Avoni fleet is arriving. We need to give the Radnorans more information."

"I think we should take a look at the comm system," Anakin said. "There might be a way to fix it, or at least fabricate a makeshift comm unit that has enough power to reach the other sector."

Ferus shook his head. "We won't be able to fix a planetary system," he said. "Atmospheric disturbances are too great."

"We don't know that," Anakin argued. "It's worth a try. We need to coordinate with the other sector."

"Here we go again," Darra said, looking from Anakin to Ferus. "Don't you two ever agree?"

Anakin looked at Tru. He needed backup.

"I think we should try it," Tru said.

"Why not?" Darra agreed. "We're at a dead end, anyway."

Ferus nodded. "All right. But while you and Tru work on the comm problem, Darra and I should investigate those Prototype Droids. Maybe if we find out how they were stolen, we can find out more about the raiders. I'm still worried about who is behind them."

*So am I, Anakin said silently. We all are.*

The two Padawan teams split up. Anakin and Tru retraced their steps back to the Emergency Command Center. They



## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

needed to get permission from Galen to access the central power source.

“Why not?” Galen said, waving a hand. “Our tech experts can’t fix it. Give it a try.”

Anakin and Tru entered the comm center. “Thanks for backing me up,” Anakin said. “Have you noticed how Ferus has been taking control?”

“No,” Tru said. “I’ve noticed he’s had some good ideas. So have you.”

“Well, I don’t like being bossed around,” Anakin muttered.

Tru gave him a sidelong look. “This isn’t a game of sabaac, Anakin. No one is keeping score. We’re all just trying to do the right thing.”

“I don’t like the way he operates, that’s all,” Anakin said.

Tru shook his head. “You’re doing the same thing he’s doing, Anakin. You’re thinking ahead. You’re coming up with ideas. You two are the most experienced Padawans on the mission. It’s natural. I like Ferus. You would, too, if you gave him a chance. He has plenty of friends for a reason.”

“Ferus doesn’t have friends. He has followers,” Anakin said. He didn’t like the way the conversation was going, so he began to study the console. “This is pretty standard.”

Tru bent over some large-scale holofiles. “I found the blueprint of the system,” he said. “We should be able to pinpoint the problem. Fixing it is another matter.”

“Let me try the rangefinders first,” Anakin said. He bent over the tech console, his fingers flying. He was lucky that he had excelled in his tech classes. He hadn’t been content to merely learn what the Masters had wanted him to. He had haunted the tech rooms at the Temple, eager to find out how everything worked.

Anakin tried sending a series of messages, then backtracked through the system, attempting to locate the precise problem.

Puzzled, Anakin frowned.

## Jude Watson

"I know, I don't get it, either," Tru said, jumping into the middle of a conversation they weren't having, as he usually did. "It doesn't make sense. If the toxin had created a disturbance in the atmosphere, the sensors should be recording the activity."

"Everything checks out on the planet itself," Anakin said, clicking a few more keys. "The system should be working."

"Only it isn't," Tru said. "You've got to trust reality over a sensor. No matter how much it hurts."

"Sensors don't lie unless they're broken," Anakin said. "And these aren't." Suddenly, he looked up and met Tru's silvery gaze.

"No," Tru said.

"Yes," Anakin said. "What else can it be? The comm system isn't being jammed in the planetary atmosphere. It's being jammed from space."

Tru whistled under his breath. "Which means someone, somewhere, wants to cut the planet off. And that can only mean one thing."

"Invasion," they said together.

## Chapter Thirteen

Curi sat in the office, a plate of untouched food pushed away from her and a datapad in front of her. She rested her head against her hand, and, behind her mask, her eyes were closed.

Obi-Wan and Siri paused. If Curi was resting at last, they didn't want to disturb her.

Without opening her eyes, she spoke. "We can't find it. Whatever makes Wilk immune to the toxin, we might never know. We've checked out everything."

"I'm sorry," Siri said.

Curi opened her eyes. She started to scratch her head, then remembered she was in her bio-iso suit. She grimaced. "There's something else. We used our lab facilities to run the tests. While we waited for results, I looked up everything on the toxin. I'd already done that when this first happened, but things were moving so fast...I didn't have time to look closely. There are gaps in the research."

"What do you mean?" Obi-Wan asked. "Gaps in the way it was conducted?"

"No," Curi said. "Gaps in the records. There are files missing."

"So it's possible that—" Siri began.

"That the accident wasn't an accident," Curi finished.

## Jude Watson

They left Curi, who was about to return to her lab to investigate further. Obi-Wan looked at Siri.

“The ferry ships should have landed by now.”

She nodded. “Let’s go.”

The Avoni fleet had landed on the outskirts of the Isolation Sector. Obi-Wan and Siri took Curi’s airspeeder, which she’d made available for their use. They stopped the speeder a few hundred meters away from the ferry ships, hiding it behind a rocky outcropping.

The wind was strong here, driving the dust against their clothes. The bio-iso suits protected their eyes and skin from the peppery blasts.

The gleaming black ships had landed in formation. A few Avoni workers dressed in bio-iso suits were ferrying skiffs out the cargo loading doors.

“No doubt they’re going to use the skiffs to ferry the Radnorans from Aubendo to the fleet,” Obi-Wan murmured. “There must be another ship on the other side of the energy gate for Tacto.”

“Then why off-load them now?” Siri asked. “And why are they full of durasteel crates?”

“Good question,” Obi-Wan said. “Let’s get closer.”

They moved from rock to rock, trying to get close enough to see what was inside the skiffs. As they lingered in the shadow of a ship’s wing, the passenger ramp suddenly lowered. An Avoni officer strode down.

“Progress report!” he called out to the workers.

The worker quickly approached him with a datapad. Obi-Wan glanced at Siri, and after a wordless communication they both dashed up the passenger ramp.

The ship hallway was deserted. Quickly they made their way down it. Now they were in the cargo hold of the ship. There were no ground craft here. No guards or officers.

Obi-Wan accessed a door, keeping himself well out of sight as it slid open. He peered into the doorway. He found himself

## **STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice**

looking inside a large cargo bay. It was filled with Battle Droids that were ominously familiar.

“These are the Prototype Droids we fought in the Clear Sector,” Siri said. “How did the Avoni get them?”

They stepped through the doorway. At that instant, a detector light turned red.

“Mistake,” Obi-Wan muttered. “I think we just tripped a silent sensor.”

Suddenly an alarm sounded. “Intruder,” a pleasant voice announced. “Intruder.”

“Not so silent,” Siri said grimly. “Let’s get out of here while we can.”

But even as they turned, the first line of attack droids snapped to life. Behind them, the next line flipped into position. And blaster fire erupted around the Jedi.

## Chapter Fourteen

Obi-Wan and Siri knew that they were no match for this many droids. And at any moment, Avoni troops could appear. Blaster fire pinged around them. Behind them, the door began to slide shut.

Obi-Wan and Siri deflected blaster fire as they moved backward. The frequency of the fire was astonishing. The air filled with smoke. In their bio-iso suits, the Jedi could not move with their customary grace. Obi-Wan felt blaster fire uncomfortably close to his shoulder.

“Obi-Wan!” Siri called.

The doors were closing, and they were too far to make it.

Obi-Wan stepped forward and, with one smooth motion, sliced a droid in half. He took the severed trunk of the body and tossed it back just in time to land between the closing door and the wall. With a grating noise, the door closed on the droid. The metal began to compress with a terrible groaning sound as the door struggled to shut. The gap was just wide enough for Siri to fit through. Even as she squeezed past, the door was closing. Obi-Wan’s lightsaber danced, a blade of light that deflected the ongoing blaster fire of the droids. He squeezed through the opening after Siri. A Prototype Droid tried to follow and smashed into the door. Obi-Wan tumbled into the hallway as

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

another droid fired between the gap. Blaster fire zinged past their ears. The droid tried to barrel its way through the remains of the first droid and the closing door.

Obi-Wan and Siri didn't hesitate. As more droids thudded against the half-closed door, they ran for the ramp.

The Avoni officer was still busy with the workers. He must have received a shipboard communication through his headset, for he turned and scanned the area. "Intruders!" he snapped to the workers. "Leave the skiffs. Secure the ferry ships! Lock down all cargo holds!"

The workers began to move. In their bio-iso suits, Obi-Wan and Siri were able to blend in. They made their way along the line of ships, looking busy. Then they ducked behind the rocks and doubled back to their speeder.

They jumped inside and took off.

"At least we weren't seen," Obi-Wan said. "The Avoni won't know we're on to them."

"They'll know someone was aboard when they find several smashed droids and a broken door," Siri said as she piloted the speeder.

"They could think that it was a droid malfunction," Obi-Wan said. "At least for a while."

"Well, that reminds me. What exactly *are* we on to?" Siri asked. "If all of those cargo holds are full of Battle Droids, we're in trouble. What I don't understand is how they're going to get the droids to Aubendo. It seems like they're using the skiffs for cargo."

"I don't know. But there's no doubt in my mind that the Avoni are planning an invasion," Obi-Wan said. "That much is clear. But we have a worse problem."

Siri nodded, her clear blue eyes suddenly clouded. "We might have to let them."

## Jude Watson

They found Ry-Gaul and Soara with Curi. Ry-Gaul and Soara were studying some results on Curi's datapad. Everyone looked grave.

"Bad news?" Siri asked.

"No, it's actually good news," Curi said. "It's just puzzling news. We discovered why Wilk is immune to the toxin. He was never exposed at all."

"What do you mean?" Obi-Wan asked. "He sneaked back into the Isolation Sector."

"Exactly. And he didn't get infected," Curi said. "When none of the immunity tests checked out, I went back and checked the research. We ran more tests. The toxin has a short half-life. The poison is already benign. It doesn't threaten the Clear Sector at all."

"Are you absolutely certain of this?" Siri asked.

For her answer, Curi slowly removed her mask. Then she stepped out of her bio-isolation suit.

"I am willing to test it," she said. "I suggest you keep your suits on, for now. If I'm wrong, you should be here to run things."

Obi-Wan admired Curi's courage. "If you're right, this is good news," Obi-Wan said. "We suspect that Avon is attempting a takeover of your planet."

"Wait a second," Siri said. "They *must* know the toxin has dispersed. That's the key to their takeover. They get everyone off-planet, and then they move in."

"But the Avoni were wearing bio-iso suits," Obi-Wan said.

Siri shrugged. "Just in case someone came by—like we did."

"Maybe that accounts for the missing research records," Soara said. "Could someone have gotten past your security system, Curi?"

Curi didn't say anything for a moment.

"Curi, we don't have time for your hesitations," Soara prodded bluntly.

"No, our security is first-rate," Curi said hesitantly.



## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

“So it would have to be an inside job,” Obi-Wan said.

Curi bit her lip. “I want to say no. But there is something I haven’t told you about Dol Heep. I’ve had direct dealings with him. Somehow he found out we were working to develop a new weapon with that toxin. The Avoni wanted exclusive rights to it. They were willing to pay a fortune. I was opposed—I have told you of my feelings about the Avoni. Not to mention that we weren’t even close to completion of our research. But Galen wanted to do the deal. He pointed out that we sell to anyone in the galaxy who will pay the price. Why stop now? He had a point. He did not like that I had come to believe we needed to do business a different way. We had terrible arguments. In the end we agreed that our relationship as brother and sister was more important than business. So Galen agreed to my point of view. He had no choice, really. He wouldn’t be able to run the lab. He’s strictly a research scientist. Dol Heep was furious at our refusal to deal with his planet. When the toxin was released, I just assumed it was an accident.”

“And now?” Soara prodded when Curi fell silent.

“And now I’m wondering why Galen didn’t know that the toxin has a short half-life,” Curi burst out. “He was the one who developed it. How could Galen have made this mistake? How could he not have known?”

“I think you know the answer to that,” Obi-Wan said. “He does know.”

## Chapter Fifteen

When Ferus and Darra arrived at the communication center, they were shocked at the news that the communications were being jammed from space.

Darra grabbed the end of her sandy Padawan braid and chewed on it nervously. "Do you think it's the Avoni?"

Anakin and Ferus nodded at the same time.

"It sure looks that way," Ferus said. He glanced at the communication console, then at Anakin and Tru. "Good work, you two. I never could have figured out that system."

"It's a perfect plan," Tru said. "Evacuate everyone off-planet. They all go willingly. Then move in."

Darra realized she was chewing on her braid and made a disgusted face. She flung it behind her shoulder. "Talk about an easy takeover."

"The question is, do we still move the Radnorans onto the Avoni transports?" Anakin asked. "We need to tell Galen this news. Maybe there's a way to delay the process until we can get more information."

"Not so fast," Darra said. "Ferus and I discovered something. The factory that made those prototype droids belongs to Galen and his sister Curi."

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

“Isn’t it too much of a coincidence that there were security lapses at both factories?” Ferus asked. He swung one powerful leg over a chair and sat astride it.

Thoughtfully, Tru leaned back in his chair. He wrapped both his rubbery legs around each other several times, then crossed his ankles. “So Galen could be involved in the release of the droids,” he said. “Or even the original industrial accident.”

“Or Curi,” Darra said. “Or both. Or neither. It could be an employee of theirs. Or an ex-employee. In other words, it could be anyone on this planet. And we have to find them in less than an hour! Not too much of a problem for a first mission.” She reached for her braid again.

Ferus leaned over and slipped his hand into Tru’s pocket. He tossed Darra a piece of figda candy. “No stress, Darra.”

“We have threads, but no patterns,” Anakin said. “Our Masters could be in danger. They don’t know about Curi’s connection to the Prototype Droids. She could be dangerous. We have to go over to the Isolation Sector and warn them.”

“Hold on,” Ferus said. His dark eyebrows lowered. “First of all, we were ordered to remain here, no matter what. We’ve been taught to heed our Masters—it’s an important part of the Jedi Order.”

“But things have changed,” Anakin argued.

“And second, there are no bio-iso suits for us,” Ferus added.

Anakin lifted his chin. “I’m not afraid. If my Master is in danger, I’ll go. You can stay here and be safe.”

For the first time, Anakin saw Ferus flush with anger. “This isn’t a bravery contest, Anakin. Think like a Jedi.”

“Don’t give me orders!” Anakin shot back hotly.

“Our first duty is to the citizens of Radnor!” Ferus snapped.

Darra stepped in between them. “Okay, ferrocrete heads, let’s calm down. We’re supposed to work together, remember? Time is running out for the citizens of this planet. Let’s focus on that.”

“It’s him!” Anakin and Ferus exclaimed together.

Darra’s lips quirked. “Ah. At last you agree on something.”

## Jude Watson

"Anakin is right. Our Masters could be in danger," Tru said. Anakin started to speak, but he held up a hand. "Ferus is also right. We must think like Jedi. And that means we must trust our Masters. We can't assume that they haven't discovered the same information that we have. We must proceed with the mission. If we have to cross over to the Isolation Sector, we will. But not yet."

"What do you suggest?" Darra asked.

"If the Radnorans remain on the planet, they will die," Tru said. "Therefore, we must allow the Avoni to transport them off-planet. But we must foil the invasion somehow."

"Four Padawans are going to foil an invasion from an entire planet?" Darra asked. She glanced at Ferus. "If you say no stress, I'll bite you."

"Okay, some stress," Ferus said with a worried smile.

They could see outside the windows of the communication center that the population of the Clear Sector was beginning to report to the evacuation points. So far things were going smoothly. But as time ran out, that could change.

"Our first step is to follow through and make sure the evacuation takes place peacefully," Ferus said. "We have to monitor the two checkpoints. Galen gave us the locations. Let's go."

Anakin trailed after the others. Once again the Padawans split into teams to cover the two evacuation points. He headed for his designated spot with Tru. So far the lines were proceeding with little incident. Names were being checked off on datapads. The skiffs from the ferry ship had not yet arrived. There was little he and Tru could do. Anakin still wasn't happy with their decision.

"We have to find out what's really going on," Anakin said restlessly to Tru. "Our Masters could be in danger."

"It doesn't seem in character for them to just give up," Tru said.

"Our Masters?"

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

“The raiders,” Tru mused. “Think of all the goods in that warehouse. They went to a lot of trouble to steal it. Remember the Manikons? No thief likes to leave their plunder behind.”

“Why are you worrying about the raiders?” Anakin asked. “They’re the least of our problems.”

“Maybe they’re part of our problem, only we don’t know it,” Tru said. “They have access to the evacuation files. They’ve been able to breach security and steal some major Battle Droids. We know they’re connected to the evacuation effort somehow. What if—”

“They’re connected to the Avoni?” Anakin asked.

Tru shrugged. “Maybe. It’s worth checking out. Considering the greed of the raiders and their willingness to take advantage of their devastated fellow citizens, they’d hardly leave the planet without all the things they stole.”

“You’re right,” Anakin said excitedly. “They might return to that warehouse.” He eyed Tru. “Ferus won’t like it.”

“As you keep pointing out, Ferus is not our leader,” Tru said. “So let’s go.”

Anakin felt a surge of excitement as he and Tru hurried through the streets to the warehouse. This was more like it. Jedi didn’t sit passively by and wait for events to unfold. They made things happen. Tru understood that.

The population of Tacto was beginning to spill out, carrying bundles of belongings. Most citizens had blasters strapped to their waists. Tensions ran high. Everyone was intent on sticking up for themselves and their own family. No one seemed to be helping anyone else. Each Radnoran was focused on his or her place on the evacuation ship and getting there as quickly as possible.

Anakin wasn’t sure how long he and Tru would be willing to wait at the warehouse. They really shouldn’t have left their posts at all. The Force was dark on this planet. Violence could erupt at any time.

## Jude Watson

But they were lucky. When they slipped inside the warehouse, they found one of the raiders already there.

He was loading a gravsled with stolen goods as quickly as he could. Because of his haste, he stacked the goods clumsily. Some durasteel bins fell off the back of the gravsled, scattering their contents.

“Need some help?” Anakin asked impulsively.

He and Tru activated their lightsabers and stood before the raider. They knew they would not have to use them.

The Radnoran was small and slight. He looked from Anakin to Tru and back again. Then he tried to smile.

“Greetings. The name is Ruuin. My buddy told me that he left some of his things in this warehouse. Gave me a key, so I—”

“Save it.” Anakin deactivated his lightsaber. “Time’s up. The evacuation is beginning. You can get aboard a ship—”

“Or we can stick you in a detention cell,” Tru said.

“And things are so confusing around here, we just might forget to get you out before the winds shift,” Anakin said.

Ruuin’s eyes darted nervously. “C’mon. You wouldn’t do that. You’re Jedi.”

“Technically, we’re not,” Anakin said. “We’re *training* to be Jedi.”

“There’s quite a difference, actually,” Tru said. He shrugged. “We’re just learning the rules.”

“So let me think. Is it against Jedi rules to leave a suspect imprisoned when we know a deadly toxin is in the air?” Anakin frowned, pretending to ponder. “You have any idea, Tru?”

“I think I skipped that class,” Tru said.

“Wise guys. I always meet up with wise guys,” Ruuin said under his breath. “All right, all right. What do you want to know?”

“Who are you working for?” Anakin asked.

“How do I know? Some guy,” the Radnoran said. He quickly put his hands up in protest as both Anakin and Tru took a step toward him. “I’m telling the truth. I was paid a wage and a share

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

of the spoils. The guy's name is Nonce, if that helps you. If you were security police, you'd know him. He's been in detention most of his life. But somebody hired *him*. I don't know who. Now can I go?"

"How did you get access to the evacuation plans?" Anakin asked.

"I didn't. Nonce did. And I don't know how he got them. *Now* can I go?"

"If you stayed around long enough to raid all those homes and businesses, how could you be sure to get a place for the evacuation?" Tru asked.

There was a subtle shift in Ruuin's gaze. He didn't look away. But something changed. Anakin knew he was about to lie.

"We would have been done in time."

"No, you wouldn't," Anakin said. "And you wouldn't endanger yourself and your new riches by taking a chance. So what was the plan? How were you going to get off-planet?"

"The same way everyone else is," Ruuin said. "Those ferry ships. Can I go now?"

Anakin didn't know what to do. It was obvious that Ruuin wasn't going to tell them the truth. He was more afraid of someone else than he was of the Padawans.

Suddenly, Tru reached over and snatched Ruuin's datapad from his belt. "Maybe this will tell us something."

"Hey! Hey! That's my property!"

Anakin glanced at the stolen plunder around them. "Do you really think you're in a position to complain?"

Tru was busily clicking keys. "Look," he said to Anakin, tilting the datapad toward him. "See these coordinates? This must be a landing site. And it doesn't match the ones we know for the ferry ships."

"You have an escape plan," Anakin told Ruuin. "Let me tell you something. You're not going to make it. You're not going to make it onto a ship at all. Let me tell you something else." He

## Jude Watson

took a step closer to Ruuin. “You have much more to fear from the Jedi than you do from anyone else. Even the Avoni.”

“The Avoni?” Ruuin’s tongue darted out nervously. “I never mentioned the Avoni. Look, you’ve got to let me go, all right? You don’t understand the penalty I’m facing. I could be imprisoned for treason.” He stopped suddenly.

“Treason,” Anakin said slowly. “That means there is another planetary government involved.”

“Like the Avoni,” Tru said.

Ruuin wiped his perspiring forehead. “All right. Yes, it was the Avoni. The coordinates are for another Avoni ship. They’re airlifting the raiders off-planet. They don’t want us to get caught here. We need to leave before the Senate ships arrive. They promised us that no matter what happens, we’ll get off. They backed our raids. They wanted as much disruption and panic to spread as possible. We’re all supposed to get houses and money once we get to Avon.”

“Didn’t you ask yourself why the Avoni were doing all this?” Tru asked, disgusted. “Were you just going to allow them to invade your planet?”

“I don’t ask questions,” Ruuin said. “I’m a thief, not a philosopher.”

“The panic would distract the population even further,” Tru murmured to Anakin. “They wouldn’t have time to figure out what the Avoni were planning.”

Anakin nodded. He turned to Ruuin. “Who was Nonce’s contact? How did you get those prototype droids? Who is the contact with the Avoni?” he rapped out.

“I don’t know anything,” Ruuin said desperately. “I’m just a thief. I’m nobody. There’s no one left to talk to. *Now* can I go?”



## Chapter Sixteen

Curi's courageous test to remove her bio-iso suit soon confirmed that there was no longer any danger from the toxin. Additional testing proved it.

All the Jedi removed their suits. It was a relief to Obi-Wan to breathe the air again. Without the constricting suit, the Jedi would be able to fight more effectively, should they need to.

"We need to head back to Clear Sector immediately," Obi-Wan said. "If we can stop the evacuation, we can stop any planned takeover by the Avoni. They're expecting an unpopulated planet."

"You know what this means about the comm systems, don't you?" Soara said. "The Avoni must be jamming the planet. It's the only explanation."

The other Jedi nodded. They had all come to the same conclusion.

They could do no more in Isolation Sector. Curi had found two functioning speeders for them. They split into teams and took off through the empty city, heading for the outskirts and the fastest route to the Clear Sector.

Despite the danger of the coming invasion, Obi-Wan felt relief that he would get to see Anakin again at last. He was anxious to see how his Padawan had fared.

## Jude Watson

"You look relieved," Siri said, giving him a quick glance as she piloted the speeder. "I am, too."

"You didn't seem very worried."

"When do I ever seem worried?" Siri said with a short laugh. "I just hide things better than you do, that's all. Sometimes I wonder if you expect me to have any feelings at all, Obi-Wan."

It was true. Obi-Wan did not often look beneath Siri's cool confidence. He should have known better.

As they reached the vast plain outside the city, Siri increased her speed. "Things always came easily to Ferus at the Temple," she remarked. "His gifts helped him sail through his classes. His good nature won him many friends. But you and I know that the galaxy teaches us harder lessons."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "We know this to be true."

"So I worry about the day Ferus discovers this, too," Siri said. "Failure is part of being a Jedi, too. The one who does not have to work hard for his gifts will one day fail, as we all do. He will try his hardest, he will sacrifice everything he has to give, and still he will not win. I suspect his failure will be rougher than it needs to be. I wait for that day, and I worry."

Obi-Wan feared the same for Anakin. Siri had put into words a certain dread he carried in his heart.

And he had congratulated himself for overcoming his old rivalry with Siri! Obi-Wan shook his head, smiling. Obviously traces of that rivalry remained. Otherwise he would have confided in her.

"What is it?" Siri asked, catching his smile.

"Remind me to stop underestimating you," he said.

She grinned. "Gladly."

"And thank you."

Siri turned her attention to the controls. She never acknowledged thanks or compliments. But Obi-Wan knew the moment had added to their friendship.

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

He saw a speck on the horizon, and his attention sharpened. The surge in the Force told Obi-Wan that the speck was not one of the native uizani birds of Radnor.

"To our right," he said to Siri over the noise of the airspeeder.

She nodded. Obi-Wan contacted Ry-Gaul on his comlink and alerted him to the speck, which was now growing into a black shape.

"Definitely some kind of transport," Siri said.

The dark presence in the Force was growing. Obi-Wan felt it like a wave against his skin.

"Strange," he said. "It looks like a smaller version of an MTT." He was familiar with the Multi Troop Transport ships from his dealings with the Trade Federation. Battle Droids could be compressed and loaded into the ship with no wasted space.

"An MTT? I think you might be right. Well, now we have the answer to my question," Siri said grimly. "We know how they are transporting Battle Droids. The MTT must have been in the cargo hold of one of the ferry ships."

"That's why the Avoni officer ordered a lockdown of the cargo holds," Obi-Wan guessed.

"We'd better get off these coordinates." Siri deftly turned the airspeeder to the right. Behind her, Ry-Gaul made the same turn. "I think I remember some ground canyons due south of us. Can you find them?"

Obi-Wan entered their coordinates on the onboard computer. "You're right. We're only a few kilometers away. We can hide there and see what's going on. Before we stop the evacuation we should find out exactly what we're up against. It shouldn't take long." He entered the new coordinates, then quickly contacted Ry-Gaul and Soara to tell them the new plan.

Siri pushed the engines faster. They were close to the ground and small enough that they should avoid detection. They assumed the transport was headed for the city of Aubendo.

"The ship is turning," Obi-Wan said suddenly.

## Jude Watson

"That's odd," Siri muttered. She glanced over her shoulder, then pushed the engines harder. "Can you get a fix on it?"

Obi-Wan aimed a macrolaser tracker at the ship. Within seconds, the airspeeder computer had mapped out the probable destination of the ship. The coordinates matched where they were heading.

"Either it's following us, or it's heading to the same canyon area," Obi-Wan told Siri. "Let's try an experiment."

Quickly, he entered new coordinates into the shipboard computer. Siri changed direction. After a few moments, the ship changed as well.

"It *is* following us," Siri said. "Why? What would an MTT want with two tiny airspeeders?"

"Unless they know the Jedi are aboard," Obi-Wan said.

Siri gave him a quick glance, the wind whipping her hair against her cheek. "Curi?"

"Maybe. Or we could have been under surveillance. Our only hope is to lose it in those canyons. Those ships are too big to maneuver the way we can."

"We'll have to get to the canyons first," Siri murmured. The engines were on full, and the MTT was gaining.

Obi-Wan answered his comlink and heard Soara's clipped tone. "They must know we're Jedi."

"Yes. We can lose it in the canyons."

"Let's hope so. Those MTTs can carry a full platoon of droids."

Obi-Wan cut the communication. The ship was gaining on them. He wasn't concerned. The canyons were only a few kilometers away. They should make it. He had complete confidence in Siri's ability as a pilot. The bulky transport would not be able to follow them.

He wasn't concerned...*so why am I concerned?* Obi-Wan wondered, shaking his head at his lapse in logic.

"Something's wrong," he said.

"There you go again," Siri said. "Stating the obvious."

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

“So you feel it, too?”

“I do.”

“They could be herding us toward the canyons because they know they could trap us there.”

“They could. But we have no choice. We don’t have another strategy,” Siri said. “There’s nothing between here and Tacto. No place for us to hide.”

The canyons were ahead. They could see the odd zigzag tracing of them in the ground. It wasn’t until they were on top of them that they could see that the lines on the ground were actually deep fissures. Siri aimed the airspeeder down into their depths. The sky went gray as the sun disappeared.

The fissure widened as they dropped, and they found themselves in a large underground canyon. There were offshoots to the sides, but they were too narrow even for an airspeeder.

Ry-Gaul hugged their rear. The MTT zoomed downward, still chasing them.

“They have a plan, all right,” Siri said between her teeth as she dove down.

Obi-Wan wished they had a more nimble transport. The airspeeder was meant to travel on repulsorlift engines along the surface of a planet. It had a limited ability to dive and maneuver.

The MTT was almost on them now. Obi-Wan was uncomfortably aware that MTTs were often equipped with proton torpedos.

“What I wouldn’t give for a deflector shield,” Siri muttered.

Suddenly the canyon wall next to them exploded. Rocks and debris slammed into the airspeeder. Siri had trouble hanging on to the controls.

Behind them, Ry-Gaul and Soara were also in trouble. A blast from the MTT had hit their rear. They were falling through the air, trailing black smoke. Ry-Gaul fought to regain power.

“They’re going down!” Obi-Wan shouted.

## Jude Watson

Obi-Wan reached out with the Force, knowing it was useless. He could not stop an airspeeder from crashing. Helplessly, he watched it begin to spiral.

“Hang on!” Siri shouted. She put their airspeeder into a steep dive. Underneath her hands, the controls vibrated and the whole craft shook. She was pushing the craft to its maximum —and beyond.

Siri turned sharply to the left, slipping under the other airspeeder. At the exact moment they were underneath, Ry-Gaul and Soara leaped.

They landed on the rear of the speeder, sending it tilting crazily. Ry-Gaul and Soara released their cable hooks, fastening themselves to the craft as it bucked and rolled. Siri’s face was set with determination as she battled with the out-of-control speeder.

Ground loomed up at them. Canyon walls rushed past. Ahead was a sheer cliff. Siri tried to slow the craft, but the engines were stuck.

“Cut the power!” Obi-Wan shouted.

Siri shut down the engines. With a piercing whine, they cut out. The speeder bounced off the ground, then spun wildly. Soara and Ry-Gaul desperately hung onto their cables. Obi-Wan was thrown from his door against Siri. His head slammed back against the seat.

The speeder suddenly smashed against the canyon wall, then came to a stop.

Obi-Wan tasted blood in his mouth, but he knew he was unhurt. He looked over at Siri. She winced, but she nodded to let him know she was all right. Soara was trying to pick herself up, but her leg was at an awkward angle. Ry-Gaul supported her and helped her rise.

The Jedi did not hesitate. They did not even have time to wait until their heads were clear. The MTT was zooming down toward them, laser cannons firing.

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

Obi-Wan and Siri leaped off the speeder and ran for cover. Ry-Gaul supported Soara and hustled her toward shelter. Obi-Wan found a small passageway between sheer canyon walls. He darted inside and the others followed.

Ry-Gaul leaned down to examine Soara's leg. "Not broken."

Soara tried to smile. "At last some good news."

"Can you walk?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Yes," Soara said, her face white with pain.

"No," Ry-Gaul said gently. "But I will help you."

They followed the twisting trail, moving as fast as they could despite Soara's injury.

"I doubt they'll unload the droids here," Siri said.

"If this is an invasion, they'll want to get on with it," Soara said through clenched teeth. "Why waste time on four Jedi? Maybe they'll just give up and go away."

"This trail is doubling back on itself," Obi-Wan said suddenly. "It's going to bring us back to where we started."

"Great," Siri said. "I missed that MTT."

Obi-Wan inched close to the edge of the wall. He looked out.

The MTT had landed in a clear space a few hundred meters away. The ramp lowered. As Obi-Wan watched, troop after troop of Prototype Droids marched down.

"They are unloading the droids," he said. "They aren't giving up."

## Chapter Seventeen

Anakin and Tru managed to find one of the few security officers left on the planet. They left Ruuin in his care.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he bribes or talks his way out of custody," Anakin said, watching as Ruuin walked away with the officer, talking quickly and gesturing with his short, stubby arms.

"It doesn't matter," Tru answered. "We have proof that Radnor is being invaded. We'd better talk to the others."

"Sure, so Ferus can tell us what to do," Anakin grumbled.

"Well, what do *you* think we should do?" Tru asked as they hurried toward the checkpoint Ferus and Darra were guarding.

"I think Galen is behind this, and we should confront him," Anakin said. "He can tell us exactly what the Avoni are planning. Then we can figure out how to foil it."

"Somehow I doubt it will be that easy," Tru said.

"I do, too," Anakin agreed. "But I can't think of anything else."

They reached Darra and Ferus and quickly told them what they had found.

"We don't know for sure that it's Galen," Ferus said.

"We don't have time to come up with another suspect," Anakin insisted. "We have to move now. We don't know what's



## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

going on in the Isolation Sector. Our Masters could be in danger.”

“Anakin is right,” Darra agreed. “We won’t lose anything by confronting Galen.”

“Let’s go,” Ferus declared.

*As if it was his idea*, Anakin thought.

The four Padawans hurried to the command center. Galen was just tossing a small survival kit into his airspeeder.

“Going somewhere?” Anakin asked.

“Of course I am,” Galen answered. “As soon as everyone is safely off the planet.”

“You seem to be in a special hurry,” Darra observed.

Galen gave an exasperated sigh. “What are you getting at now?”

“We have solid information that the planet Avon was behind the raids and also the theft of those Prototype Droids,” Anakin said. “And we think you know something about it.”

Galen chuckled, shaking his head. “You kids sure come up with some incredible theories. I’ve been trying to *help* the citizens of Radnor!”

“What about the original toxic accident?” Ferus asked. “And the theft of the droids? Both things happened at your facilities.”

“It’s called bad luck,” Galen said. “I’m one of the top scientists on Radnor. Maybe someone targeted me. And as soon as all this is over, we’ll be going over our safety procedures very carefully. But I’m not responsible. I’ve been risking my life by staying here. I could have left long ago. I had the money. My sister and I decided to stay to help our fellow citizens. Why are you accusing me?”

Now Galen looked hurt, not angry. Anakin did not pick up anything amiss. He wished Obi-Wan were here. He was not yet adept at reading the true motives of other beings.

Anakin remembered Ruuin’s anxiousness to get away. No doubt he had a rendezvous time with the Avoni as well as a rendezvous point. Maybe Galen had the same problem.

## Jude Watson

"I say we just hold him until the Avoni ships take off," Anakin told the others. "He can wait here with us for the Senate ships."

Tru's silver eyes flickered as he understood Anakin's strategy. "I agree."

"This is ridiculous!" Galen exploded. Finally they had cracked his wounded composure. "I refuse, after all I've done, to subject myself to these suspicions."

He jumped inside the airspeeder and revved the engine. But he hadn't counted on the quick reflexes of the Padawans. Anakin reached over and shut off the engine as Tru jumped in and accessed the onboard computer. He read out the coordinates that flashed on the screen. They were the same as Ruuin's.

"I'm sorry, Galen," Anakin said. "We now have proof. Those are the coordinates of an Avoni landing site. You are going to be airlifted off-planet."

"Yes, so what?" Galen bellowed. "Along with everyone else!"

"I don't think so. I think you cut a special deal with the invaders. You and your conspirators would have had new lives on Avon—thanks to your betrayal of your planet."

A small, shocked voice came from behind them. "No."

Anakin turned. A small woman with features similar to Galen's stood in the doorway. He recognized Galen's sister Curi from the hologram Galen had received the day they'd arrived. "It can't be true. Galen? Is it true?"

"Of course not, Curi," Galen said. "These Jedi are children. What do they know?"

Darra ignored Galen's comment. "Did you leave our Masters in the Isolation Sector?" she asked urgently.

Curi tore her sorrowful gaze from her brother and faced the Padawans. "They were on their way here. The toxin is no longer dangerous. It has a short half-life, we've just discovered. The winds will bring no danger to Tacto."

"And our Masters?" Darra asked. "Where are they now?"

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

“They are in great danger,” Curi said. “They are pinned down by the Avoni invaders outside the city of Aubendo in the ground canyon fields. Dol Heep had them under surveillance. I discovered that he had placed tracking devices in my transports. When I found out I went after them. I was just in time to see a large vessel force them down. They are under attack from a platoon of Battle Droids. *Our* Battle Droids,” she added, with a glance at Galen.

“How can we trust her?” Ferus asked the others in a low tone. “What if she and Galen are in league together? What if they’re trying to get us out of the Clear Sector so they can take off?”

The Padawans looked at one another, confusion on their faces. Yes, Curi could be lying. Galen definitely was. Who could they trust?

*Trust yourself. Breathe in your instinct. Then act.*

Anakin closed his eyes for a moment. He touched the river stone in his pocket, sliding his fingers over its warmth. He reached out to the Force, to a place that he knew well. He felt a distant tug—Obi-Wan. Yes, his Master was in danger. And Curi...Curi was telling the truth.

Unease was still on his fellow Padawans’ faces. But Anakin locked eyes with Ferus. “We can’t take a chance with our Masters’ lives.”

Ferus hesitated only a fraction, surprised at the depth of Anakin’s contact with the Force. “You’re right. Let’s go.”

## Chapter Eighteen

The Padawans commandeered Galen's airspeeder. The four of them squeezed inside. Curi gave them the coordinates of where she had last seen the Avoni transport and the Jedi.

"Look at all these Radnorans in bio-isolation suits," Darra observed. "I sure hope Curi is telling the truth, or we'll be in for a big surprise when the winds shift."

Darra spoke lightly, but no one felt entirely easy about their decision. Even Anakin was a little worried. He was betting everything on his intuition. If he was wrong, the consequences would be severe. He could die, along with the other Padawans.

*I'm not wrong.*

He could feel Ferus's eyes on him. He kept his gaze forward as he piloted the craft. He wasn't about to retreat now.

Ahead they saw the energy gate that led to the Isolation Sector. Curi had given them the coordinates to bypass it. Anakin entered them into a signal beam and the energy gate opened. They zoomed through.

For a moment, they all held their breath. Then Ferus took a deep breath. Darra did the same.

"Well, there's no turning back now," she said.

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

Ferus accessed the mapping device on the shipboard computer. He studied the ground canyon site. "There are several access points," he said.

"We have to assume that they're probably still very close to where Curi saw them," Darra said. "She said their speeders were destroyed."

"She also said the transport following them was quite large," Tru added. "So if we take a narrow route through the canyons, we might have the element of surprise."

"We're going to need more than surprise if that transport was filled with Prototype Droids," Ferus remarked. "Not only that, the transport probably has some sort of blaster cannons."

"If you're trying to raise our confidence level, it's not working," Darra said.

"We're coming up on the ground canyons," Ferus warned.

Anakin slowed down slightly. Ahead he only saw what looked like scribble markings on the ground. Then he realized the markings revealed deep cracks in the ground surface.

Ferus read out a coordinate. "Take that route," he said. "It will bring us close to where Curi saw our Masters."

Anakin zoomed down the canyon. He hugged the canyon walls, going as fast as he dared. By the look on Ferus's face, it was faster than the other Padawan would like. Anakin pushed the engines up a notch. He knew he was in complete control.

Ahead he saw the large, hulking shape of the Avoni transport ship. It was idling, its repulsorlift engines on low, keeping it a few meters off the ground. Dust rose around it in a filmy cloud. Anakin grew excited.

"I've seen that kind of transport before," he said. "It was years ago, in the Trade Federation battle for Naboo. This is a slightly smaller version of an MTT—a Multi Troop Transport. They store Battle Droids and are usually piloted by two droids."

"They also have heavy frontal armor. The ship itself can be a weapon." Tru looked uneasy. "They can go through rock walls."

## Jude Watson

"It looks like this one already did," Darra said, swallowing hard.

A solid wall of rock had been splintered into fragments. Droids littered the ground.

"Our Masters must have battled there," Ferus said in a hushed tone.

Anakin hovered near the sight, careful to keep out of sight of the MTT's bridge. They saw no evidence of their Masters.

"I hear blaster fire," Darra said suddenly. "We're close."

Then Anakin could hear it, too. He placed his hands back on the controls, ready to zoom ahead.

"Wait!" Ferus commanded.

Annoyed, Anakin turned to him. "What now? More *planning*?"

"Yes," Ferus said steadily. "If we rush in there without a plan, we won't be much help to them."

"What kind of a plan do we need?" Anakin asked. "They're being attacked by droids! We go in and help them!"

Darra groaned. "I thought the worst thing about being on this mission was protein cubes for breakfast. Now I know it's you two. Ferus, what are you thinking?"

"How many droids did the MTT on Naboo hold?" Ferus asked Anakin.

"I don't remember," Anakin said. "Over a hundred, I think."

"One hundred and twelve," Tru said softly.

"And this is only a little smaller," Ferus said. "So let's say it holds about fifty to seventy droids, at least. What are the chances we can battle that many with our lightsabers?"

Darra swallowed. "I can't tell you how much I hate to hear the odds before a battle."

"So what are you saying?" Anakin asked. "We call for more Jedi?"

"Or more lightsabers," Darra said.

Ferus shook his head. "Of course not. We just need to think, that's all. We have a couple of advantages. One is surprise. The

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

other is the fact that you and Tru seem to know a lot about that transport.”

Anakin nodded. He had explored one on Naboo after the battle.

“The question is, how do we get aboard?” Ferus asked.

“Can you deactivate the droids from the MTT?” Darra asked.

Anakin shook his head. “No, they’re controlled from either the landing ship or from orbit.”

“No stress with that,” Ferus said. “If you get aboard, can you pilot the ship?”

“I can pilot anything,” Anakin said flatly.

“Didn’t you say that the ship is also a weapon?” Ferus asked.

The four Padawans looked at one another.

“Of course,” Anakin said. “If we control the ship, we control the battle.”

“There’s the deployment hatch,” Tru said. “But the release valve is on the bridge.”

“I think the only way is—” Anakin began.

“You’re right,” Tru said. “But we’d have to do it—”

“Exactly. But the venting system—”

“So we don’t have to worry about being seen.” Tru nodded rapidly. “Okay, that’s it, then.”

“That’s *what*?” Darra cried. “Are you two speaking some weird language from the Outer Rim?”

Anakin turned to her. “The MTT is designed by the Baktoid workshop. The Trade Federation buys most of their ships, but they rotate out the old ones and sell them off to various planets. I’m betting that’s what this transport is. Which means that its exhaust and cooling system is vented straight down toward the ground. There’s some unusually large vents on the bottom. That’s why you see all that dust around it. It’s kicked up by the wind coming out of the ship.”

“So the dust will give us cover,” Tru said. “And the vents are big enough. We can just climb up them to get aboard.”

“Won’t the wind blow you back?” Ferus asked.

## Jude Watson

"If the ship was moving, it would," Anakin said. "But the engines are idling. The ship is in passive mode. We shouldn't have too much trouble."

"We've got another problem," Darra said. "If you get control of the ship, our Masters won't know it. They'll most likely attack the ship when it comes toward them."

"That's why we have to split up," Ferus said. "Darra, you and I have to make contact with the Masters while Anakin and Tru steal the ship. We have to get the droids to follow us to an ambush." He looked at Anakin and Tru. "Does that sound okay to you?"

It was the first time Ferus had asked his opinion. Anakin nodded. "Sounds like a good plan."

"We have an agreement," Darra muttered. "Remind me to declare this an annual holiday once we get back to the Temple."

She leaned over and accessed a map to the canyons. Quickly she flipped through different sites. Then she stabbed at the viewscreen with a finger. "There. If you can maneuver the ship there, we can bring the droids through that smaller canyon and out into the clearing. Then we've got them."

The four Padawans looked at one another, exhilarated. They were going to save their Masters.

"No stress with that," Ferus said confidently.

"Completely," Anakin echoed.

There was a pause. After the initial confidence, the weight of the task ahead settled on them.

"May the Force be with us," Tru said quietly.

Ferus and Darra exited the airspeeder. Hugging the rocks, they started off through the canyon toward the sound of blaster fire.

Anakin and Tru headed in the opposite direction. They paused in the shelter of a rock to watch the MTT and its inhabitants. They could just make out the heads of the droid pilots. They rotated in constant surveillance.

"Anakin—"



## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

"I know," Anakin said. "It's a question of timing."

"I was going to say, we just have to run really, really fast," Tru said, flashing him a quick grin.

"Aim for the dust cloud."

"Right."

Anakin fitted a filter mask over his nose and pulled his hood up. Tru did the same. They slipped goggles out from their utility belts and pulled them on.

As soon as the droids' heads turned the opposite way and they were no longer in their sight line, they ran.

Anakin felt the Force rise around him from the rocks and dust. It seemed to push him faster, allowing him to dive into the sand cloud kicked up by the ship's exhaust.

Anakin hated sand. He had seen and tasted too much of it while a slave on Tatooine. Now it filtered through the dust mask and settled in his mouth. He could barely see. He could sense rather than see Tru beside him.

He held up a hand, feeling along the underside of the ship. The sand and dust were so disorienting it was hard to visualize where he was. Then he felt a raised piece of metal. Could it be the repulsor cooling fins? He ran a hand along one ridge, then another. That meant the vents were just ahead.

The wind blasts were stronger than he'd anticipated. The thought of his Master pinned down by a platoon of droids pushed him on. He could feel Tru battling the wind beside him.

Anakin reached the vents. He hoisted himself up and inside, spreading his hands out to support himself against the rounded walls and bracing himself with his feet. He would be able to move sideways up the shaft. The blast of wind was warm, but not hot. It pushed against him, but he was able to move slowly up the shaft, meter by meter, first using one hand and foot, then the other. Tru was directly beneath him.

Halfway up the vent, Anakin felt as though his legs were made of ferrocrete and his arm muscles had begun to shake. One foot slid and he almost lost his position and fell. He felt Tru touch his

## Jude Watson

back. Anakin turned, and Tru motioned to him. He would lead the way.

Anakin curled himself into a ball so that Tru could crawl past him. As soon as Anakin was behind Tru, he felt the wind lessen. Tru's flexible arms and legs were much more suited to scrambling up the vent. His body now acted as a shield. It gave Anakin a chance to restore his own strength. *This is what Obi-Wan means*, he thought suddenly. *I do not always have to prove I can lead. Sometimes someone else can do the job better.*

At last the vent opened out into the engine room, next to the humming repulsorlift generators. Anakin and Tru collapsed on the floor, trying to catch their breath.

"Whew. Some stress with that," Tru said, gasping.

They got to their feet and looked around the engine room.

"I'd say—" Tru started.

"That way," Anakin agreed.

Once they left the engine room, they had to turn sideways to navigate the corridor. Every centimeter of space was used on the vessel to pack in droids. They squeezed past the empty troop deployment racks and climbed a narrow metal staircase to the bridge. Outside the bridge door they activated their lightsabers. Taking a breath for concentration, they accessed the door and burst inside.

The droids swiveled, instantly taking in the danger. Their arms moved forward in blast mode.

Anakin and Tru were faster. They somersaulted in the air and came down with their lightsabers, each neatly slicing a droid in half.

Anakin kicked aside the droid and immediately moved to the controls. He studied them.

"Can't help you out here," Tru said. "I never got this far in the manual. Got too bored."

"It's okay. These controls are basic. You'd better strap into the copilot's seat. It might be rough going."

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

Experimentally, Anakin eased the controls forward. The ship gave a great lurch. Tru hadn't had a chance to sit, and he went flying. He landed on the floor.

"*Might* be rough?" Tru picked himself up, kicked the droid out of the way, and sat in the copilot's seat.

The next time Anakin eased the controls, the ship moved more smoothly. He took it slow for several meters, getting used to the way the ship handled. This was no nimble starfighter. This was a lumbering beast.

He would have to navigate around this canyon, through a narrower passage, and then get the beast down a smaller passage into the large clearing. Everything depended on him and Tru getting there. No one had said it, but everyone was aware that if Anakin could not maneuver the ship there, the Jedi would be trapped in the canyon with a platoon of droids—and no way out.

Anakin turned the ship into the narrower passage. He accelerated, searching for the passage Darra had marked.

After a few minutes Tru spoke. "We should have passed the turning by now."

"I know. Let's just..." Anakin's words died. Ahead, he saw only solid rock. They had come to the end of the passage. There was no way into the clearing.

"This can't be," Anakin said. He pounded the controls with his fists. "It can't be!" There was no passage. Darra had read the map wrong. They had failed, and his Master was trapped. He shouldn't have listened to Ferus. He should have—

"Can you back this thing up?" Tru asked.

Anakin tried to quiet the ranting voices in his head. "What?"

"The passage to the clearing must be blocked. It was probably a rockslide. Remember we passed that area of the wall that had all that sheared rock in the road?"

With a swift motion, Anakin reversed the engines and zoomed backward. He stopped the MTT where Tru had indicated. A passage had been here once, but it was hard to tell. Huge boulders now blocked it.

## **Jude Watson**

“Is there any other way to the clearing?” Tru asked.

Anakin shook his head. “They could be in there by now. We’ve got to get through that rock.”

“Can the MTT handle it?”

Anakin gripped the controls. They could get stuck halfway through. The rocks could collapse and bury them alive. “I don’t know. But if we don’t try, our Masters are doomed.”

## Chapter Nineteen

The Jedi crouched behind a screen of boulders and splintered rock. They had been pinned down for two hours. They had fought off three assaults from the droids. The droids held a position across the canyon where they could fire at any flicker of movement from the Jedi. Ry-Gaul had a blaster wound to the shoulder. Soara's ankle had swelled, but she'd fashioned a makeshift crutch from a felled droid's leg. A splintering rock had cut Siri over the eye. And they were all exhausted.

Over the course of the day they had kept moving from one small canyon to the next, but the smaller canyons were a maze that always led back to the large clearing and the MTT. That was what the Avoni had known. They had known they would be able to run the Jedi down until they were exhausted.

The droids were relentless, and there were so many of them. They estimated seventy to eighty. They had taken out at least twenty, maybe more. But there were at least fifty still out there, and no doubt fresh reserves would arrive. While the Jedi were pinned down, the Avoni would conduct their invasion. The Jedi Masters had not spoken of it, but they knew they were each thinking of their Padawans.

## Jude Watson

“Our only chance is to get back to the MTT,” Obi-Wan said to the others. “We have to capture the ship. It’s the only way out.”

“Capture an MTT?” Soara asked. “It’s an armored tank.”

“There’s got to be a way.” *If Anakin were here, he would know how*, Obi-Wan thought. Anakin knew his way around every ship that was ever built. He made it his business to know.

“Hold it,” Siri said. “Look!”

Obi-Wan followed her pointing finger. To his surprise, he saw Ferus and Darra heading for them, moving from rock to rock for cover. The droids turned to fire at them, keeping up a steady barrage.

A pang shot through Obi-Wan. *Where was Anakin?*

*If something had happened to him, I would know it. I would feel it.*

Ferus and Darra ran the last hundred meters, dodging blaster fire and blocking it with their lightsabers. They dived behind the rocks with the Jedi.

“So glad you could join us,” Soara said.

“Thought you might have missed us,” Darra said with a grin. Then she noted Soara’s injury. “Master, you’re hurt!”

“Just a minor inconvenience,” Soara answered.

“Anakin and Tru are capturing the MTT,” Ferus told them. “We hope. Our plan is to lure the droids to a clearing and then use the MTT to destroy them.”

“How are they getting aboard the MTT?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Apparently it has large venting tunnels on its underside,” Ferus said. “They said they could navigate them.”

Obi-Wan nodded. It sounded dangerous, but he trusted Anakin’s abilities. “How far is the rendezvous?”

“Not far. We studied the map. If we can return the way we came and get the droids to follow us down a passage, it will empty into the clearing.”

“We’ll have no problem with the droids following us,” Obi-Wan said grimly.

“No time like the present,” Ry-Gaul said.

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

"I was getting tired of this spot anyway," Siri said, wiping the blood off her forehead with her sleeve.

The Jedi gathered themselves for the next phase of the battle. They were exhausted, but they had reserves of strength they had not tapped. Ferus and Darra had given them a way out, and they were ready.

They rushed out together, lightsabers drawn. The Prototype Droids moved toward them, the front line blasting heavy firepower at them. The Jedi kept on the move. The two Masters were careful to ensure that Soara and Ry-Gaul were protected at all times. With his shoulder injury, Ry-Gaul could only swing the lightsaber to one side, and that was painful. Soara's limping progress was remarkably fast with the help of her makeshift crutch.

They reached the shelter of the passageway. They had just a moment to catch their breath. The droids wheeled in formation and followed.

They ran, letting the droids keep them in sight, but staying out of blaster range. Ferus and Darra led the way. They snaked through the passageway and came out into the clearing.

The droid platoon was behind them. Sheer rock was ahead of them.

"How is the MTT going to get in here?" Obi-Wan asked.

Ferus turned pale. "There was a route..."

Darra looked around wildly. "Where is the passage? It should be there!" She pointed to an area that appeared to be a wall of boulders.

"Rock slide," Ry-Gaul said. "See the markings there?"

"We're trapped," Soara said, glancing around quickly. "We'll have to fight them in the open." She gripped her crutch with one hand and her lightsaber with the other.

"Anakin will reach us." Obi-Wan's voice was steady.

"Through sheer rock?" Soara asked.

The droids poured into the clearing. The Jedi stood, ready to face them. Ready to face death. Whatever came, they were ready.

## **Jude Watson**

Darra's hand trembled slightly as she held her lightsaber, but she moved resolutely to cover Soara's injured side.

A tremendous noise shook the canyon. The huge boulders on the side of the canyon began to tremble. Suddenly the battered MTT burst through the wall, scattering boulders like pebbles as it mowed through the canyon and headed straight for the droids. The front of the MTT was almost completely bashed in. The engines belched smoke. But the lumbering craft still moved with lurching power as it mowed down most of the entire droid platoon. What it didn't cut down immediately was reduced to scrap by blasting proton cannons. Obi-Wan had no doubt who was at the controls.

A loud banging rang through the canyon. The battered and bent hatch on top of the bridge popped open, and Anakin emerged. He waved.

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "He will get through sheer rock. If he has to."



## Chapter Twenty

The Avoni had planned a bloodless invasion. Once the Jedi returned to Aubendo in the captured MTT and confronted Dol Heep, their plans were foiled. They did not have enough firepower to defeat a roused population.

"A complete misunderstanding," Dol Heep boomed. "Invasion? Hardly. We came to help Radnor. The Battle Droids were merely here for crowd control. So sorry about the malfunction." He eyed Soara's injured leg and Ry-Gaul's blaster wound. "However, I can see why you are so testy. Since there is no danger from the toxin, the Avoni will be happy to leave."

"We will be happy to escort you," Obi-Wan said firmly.

"But first, restore all communications to the planet," Siri added.

"We had nothing to do with the communication breakdown," Dol Heep said in the same hearty tone. "But out of the charity in my heart for the Radnoran people, I will speak to our tech experts and see if we can help."

Within minutes, communications were restored. While Ry-Gaul and Soara had their wounds tended, Siri contacted the Temple. The Senate ships were ordered to return to Coruscant. They suspected that there had been a sabotage of the engines, but there was no way to prove it.

## Jude Watson

The Radnorans would file a protest with the Senate, which would most likely get mired in debate and details. The Avoni would not pay for their plans for some time.

Meanwhile, Obi-Wan contacted the remaining security officers on the planet and ordered them to quickly spread the word about the safety of the planet. Radnorans could return to their homes.

“And put Galen into custody immediately,” Obi-Wan added.

“He already is,” the officer replied.

The Jedi arrived at the Tacto prison and were shown to a holding cell. There, Curi faced her brother across a battered metal table.

“She held a blaster on him for two hours,” the security officer murmured to them. “She told him she would kill him if he tried to escape, and I guess he knew she meant it.”

The Jedi stood in the doorway. Curi looked ravaged by pain and exhaustion.

“You have been a traitor to your planet,” she said in a flat voice to her brother. “And you have broken my heart.”

“I had no choice!” Galen said. “Don’t you see I had to do what I did?”

“No,” Curi said, shaking her head.

“You refused to deal with the Avoni. That made no sense! We dealt with anyone with the credits to pay. And so they threatened me.”

“You could have told me.”

“They told me that if I told you what they wanted—if I told anyone—they would destroy our business,” Galen went on rapidly. “I had to agree to show Dol Heep the weapons plan we were developing. That’s when the toxin was released. He did it before I could stop him. I got us both back to the Clear Sector before it took hold.”

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

“So you could have brought the toxin back and endangered Tacto as well,” Curi said. “It is just luck that you did not.”

Galen ignored this. “Dol Heep contacted his superiors. He told me that if I kept my mouth shut about the half-life of the toxin, they would pay us money and relocate us—”

“Don’t say *us*!” Curi shouted suddenly. “This is about *you*, Galen!”

“I did it for us,” Galen pleaded. “They said that if I didn’t do what they wanted, they would say that I was the one who released the cloud deliberately. I didn’t know what to do. They asked me for the research records and for the access code to our prototype Battle Droids—”

“And they paid you money for this,” Curi said bitterly. “They paid you a small fortune to betray me and yourself and your planet.”

“I didn’t know they were planning an invasion!”

“A *child* would have known they were planning an invasion!” Curi shouted. She stood and leaned over the table. “It is all excuses and lies. It always has been. I’ve never seen you so clearly. You brought me into this business. You made my life what it is. I made weapons to destroy beings and planets. I found money to fund your research into the terrible, cunning ways beings can kill other beings. I sold these weapons and put the credits in my pocket. I helped bring these things into the galaxy and I will never get the smell of death out of my nostrils. No matter what I do now, no matter where I go.”

“Curi, don’t. I need you! They’re going to imprison me for years—”

“You are lucky they don’t kill you.”

Curi turned and walked out the door.

Galen turned furious eyes on the Jedi. “You see what you’ve done? You’ve poisoned her against me!”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “Your planet is in ruins. Your family is destroyed. Thousands are dead. And still you blame others. You have not learned anything.”

## Jude Watson

"There is nothing to learn!" Galen shouted.

The echo of his words followed them as the Masters and Padawans walked down the hall.

They walked out into a bright morning. The devastation of the city of Tacto was revealed. The mobs had burned and rioted. Businesses were destroyed. Houses were barricaded. All air transports had been destroyed and looted for parts.

But now the Radnorans were busy returning to their homes and businesses. The sick were being cared for. The dead were being mourned.

"The Radnorans of Tacto are refusing to help any in the Isolation Sector who have survived," Ferus said.

"And they blame the Avoni for everything," Tru said. "They do not look to themselves for blame."

"Just like Galen," Darra said. "Tell me something. Are all missions this hard?"

"No," Soara said. "Some are harder."

"Neighbor turned on neighbor when the disaster occurred," Obi-Wan said. "This could have been an opportunity for generosity and sacrifice. Cowardice and violence erupted instead. This city was destroyed by greed and fear, not by a toxin."

"Not a good sign for the future of Radnor," Siri said.

"Yes, I won't be surprised if we are called here again someday," Ry-Gaul said.

The Jedi moved through the devastated streets toward their Senate transport. Obi-Wan swung into step beside Anakin.

"I am proud of you," he told him. "Not only did you act bravely, you worked well with the other Padawans. I heard how you all collaborated on the final plan to rescue us. You have learned a valuable Jedi lesson. You submitted your own will to listen to others. As a result, you gained strength."

"I was ready to rush after you to fight the droids," Anakin admitted. "It was Ferus who stopped me. He was right." *He was also lucky*, Anakin thought. The plan had almost gone awry. If

## STAR WARS: The Way of the Apprentice

Anakin had not managed to blast through the rock slide, four Jedi Masters and two Padawans would be dead.

But no one was bringing that up. Was Anakin the only one thinking it?

Obi-Wan would say it did not matter. What had happened, had happened. Jedi did not waste their time on ifs.

But Anakin couldn't look at it that way. The ifs were what intrigued him. The spaces between the rules.

If Ferus had been more lucky than right, had submitting his will been the right thing after all? He knew the question was not a Jedi question. He would not ask it of Obi-Wan.

It was his question. Only he could find the answer.

"So am I right? Do you feel you learned the Jedi lesson of submission of will? Do you understand the importance of the lesson?" Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin had to stop himself from giving away his unease. He would not lie to his Master. But had he truly submitted his will to Ferus? If he had to be honest, he would have to say no.

But he had submitted his will to Tru! Anakin recalled how in the exhaust system of the MTT, he had realized that Tru should be the one to lead. He had realized then how necessary cooperation was to the success of a mission. That had been the moment he had truly learned the Jedi lesson.

"Yes, I have learned the lesson well," he answered. He was happy he could be truthful.

Obi-Wan nodded in satisfaction and turned to board the transport.

Anakin started after him, but Ferus suddenly appeared at his side. Anakin had not sensed him nearby. "It's not the Jedi way to lie to your Master."

"Neither is eavesdropping," Anakin said, annoyed. "And I didn't lie."

Ferus studied him. The sunlight shone on the thick gold streaks in his dark hair. He did not look angry or accusatory. Merely thoughtful. "You did not tell the truth," he said. "You did

## Jude Watson

not truly learn the Jedi lesson. You didn't learn anything. You are like Galen."

"That isn't so." Anakin kept his voice steady. "And it is not your business. It is my Master's business what I learn."

"Obi-Wan doesn't see you clearly," Ferus said softly. "He is a great Jedi Knight, but he is blinded by affection. But I see. And I will keep looking. I will watch you, Anakin Skywalker."

Ferus turned and strode up the ramp. Anakin had to stop himself from hurtling after him and tackling him to the floor. His body shook with rage.

*Take a breath. Then another.*

Anakin willed his beating heart to slow. Slowly the red mist before his eyes cleared.

*I will watch you, too, Ferus. And if there is a battle between us, I will win.*







**Book Two**  
**The Trail of the Jedi**



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# JEDI QUEST

BY JUDE WATSON

THE TRAIL OF THE JEDI





## Chapter One

From deep space, the planet Ragoon-6 lay concealed by a blue mist shimmering in the midst of a cluster of stars. As the transport descended, the mist broke into sparkling particles that swirled around the viewscreen. Then the ship broke through into a planetary atmosphere so clear it seemed as transparent as water. Glinting below was a planet as green as a flashing jewel.

Anakin Skywalker's breath caught as he leaned forward. He had never seen such a beautiful approach to a planet.

Obi-Wan Kenobi put a hand on Anakin's shoulder as he, too, leaned forward. "I had forgotten how beautiful it is."

Anakin glanced at his Master. Despite his beard, his face suddenly looked young, even younger than when Anakin had met him five years before, when Anakin was nine years old. Obi-Wan had been a Padawan then, just like Anakin was now. No doubt Obi-Wan was remembering his other trips to the planet, the ones he had taken with his own Master, Qui-Gon Jinn.

Wren Honoran, their Jedi pilot, nodded. "I always forget until the next time I see it. It takes your breath away every time."

"It's amazing that it hasn't been colonized," Anakin said.

"It was given in trust to the Senate by its own government," Obi-Wan explained. "Only small tribes of natives still inhabit it. A Senate committee handles requests to visit. Only the Jedi and

## Jude Watson

small groups of beings can visit at any one time. Access is strictly controlled. That way Ragoon-6 will remain unspoiled, as the government wanted. There are no air lanes, no factories, no cities.”

“The Ragoons never allowed colonizers to settle,” Wren said. “Their own population sickened and dwindled until finally there was only a handful left. They could no longer keep out all those who wanted to come. They knew they would have to give up what they loved most in order to save it.”

“But if they’d just allowed colonizers to come, they could have kept their planet,” Anakin pointed out.

“Yes, but they chose not to. The beauties of their world were too important to them,” Obi-Wan explained. “To keep the planet unspoiled was their first goal.”

“They sound selfish to me,” Anakin said. “They wanted to keep their planet beautiful for themselves and a few others.”

“Or perhaps they were wise,” Obi-Wan said. “It is not for us to say.”

Anakin turned his gaze back to the planet’s surface and sighed under his breath. One of the hardest things he found about becoming a Jedi was suspending judgment. To Anakin, things were good or bad, smart or stupid. Obi-Wan had this maddening way of not taking a stance on things.

“If I had a planet that was truly my homeworld, I wouldn’t give it away. I’d want to be able to come back whenever I wanted,” Anakin said. He had spent his early years on Tatooine, but he had been a slave. He did not feel as though the planet was his home, even though his mother still lived there.

“The Temple is your home,” Obi-Wan said gently.

Anakin nodded, but he knew that in his heart he did not feel that way. He loved the Temple and was always glad to return to it. He loved its order and its grace. He loved the beauty within it, the Room of the Thousand Fountains and the deep green lake. But it did not feel like home.

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Unlike the other Jedi students, Anakin had once had a home. Unlike them, he remembered his mother. He remembered running home through the heat and bursting through the door to be met with cool and shade and open arms. He remembered his warm cheek against her cool one....

No, his home had not been a planet. It had been smaller, and humbler, and much more precious.

Life in that home had not been easy. There had been times of food shortages, times when they had shivered at night for want of fuel.

The Temple was never short of food or fuel. The temperature was maintained at the optimum degree for the various beings who lived within. It was warmer and safer than the slave quarters on Tatooine.

But it still didn't feel like home. *Home will always be where Mom is. No matter how old I get. No matter how long it's been since I've seen her.*

"There are the Rost Mountains," Wren said. "We'll land and I'll say good-bye there." He grinned over his shoulder at Anakin. "And then you'll try to catch me."

Wren was an older Jedi with a graying beard who had chosen to teach at the Temple rather than continue to go on missions. Anakin had studied the politics of governments with Wren, and he knew the Jedi Master had a wide-ranging grasp of political philosophies in the galaxy. As part of his Jedi service, Wren also volunteered to take part in training missions for Jedi teams.

Anakin and Obi-Wan would try to track Wren through the wilderness. The exercise was designed to strengthen the bond of trust between Master and Padawan. On Ragoon-6, they would have only each other to depend on as they tracked Wren through the rugged terrain.

Anakin's eyes danced as he bowed respectfully to Wren. "It will be my honor and pleasure to find you in a single day, Wren."

## Jude Watson

“Ah, in only one day, you say. You are almost as cocky as your Master used to be,” Wren said. “I think my clues just got harder. I enjoy teaching lessons to overconfident Padawans.”

Anakin hid his grin. In his classes, Wren had been respected, but he’d also been teased behind his back by the Jedi students for taking himself a little too seriously. Anakin would love to find him before a single day had passed. That would deflate his superior manner a bit!

Still, Anakin couldn’t help wondering why Obi-Wan had decided to take him on this training exercise. He already trusted his Master with his life. They had been on difficult missions together. He had known him since he was a boy. Every mission brought them closer. Why did they have to take a detour for what seemed to be an elaborate game?

They skimmed over a meadow lush with wildflowers and tall green grass. Above the grassy field, snowcapped mountains hugged the tiny meadow. The sky was deep blue streaked with violet. Anakin could almost smell the fresh scent of the flowers. He had never seen such a lush world with so many vivid colors.

Wren landed the craft expertly in a sheltered spot tucked into the rocky side of the mountain. He accessed the landing ramp and turned to them. “Remember, you must leave your comlinks aboard ship. No homing devices or droids can be used. You must rely on each other and the Force.”

Anakin and Obi-Wan nodded. They both knew these things, but it was part of the ritual that Wren repeat them. They placed their comlinks in Wren’s hand, and he stowed them in the secure storage bin.

“If you can’t find me, we will meet back here in ten days.” Pausing only to sling a survival kit over his shoulder, Wren nodded a good-bye. “May the Force be with you.” His gray eyes twinkled. “You’ll need it.”

Wren ran lightly down the ramp. He swung himself up on a flat rock, then jumped to another. Within moments, he had disappeared.



## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

“Wren is certainly looking forward to puzzling us,” Obi-Wan observed.

“He really should get out more,” Anakin said.

Obi-Wan turned to Anakin. “Do you think Wren is taking this too seriously?”

“No,” Anakin said hesitantly. “But I don’t understand why a Jedi Knight would want to spend his time this way when he could be on missions.”

“Wren has been on hundreds of missions,” Obi-Wan said with a frown. “He has served for most of his life. Now he wishes to give back his knowledge to the Padawans. It is a noble gesture.”

*Noble, but boring,* Anakin thought.

He thought it better not to share the thought with his Master. “How long do we give him?” he asked instead.

“Just a few hours,” Obi-Wan answered. “Time enough for us to explore the surroundings a bit and have a meal, you’ll be glad to hear. We’ll be on rations and protein cubes once we leave, but we can raid the ship’s galley now.” Obi-Wan gave Anakin a piercing look. “This is designed to teach us, Anakin. But it is also supposed to be fun.”

“Of course, Master.” Anakin didn’t want Obi-Wan to think he wasn’t looking forward to the exercise. He knew Obi-Wan had been here twice with Qui-Gon and treasured the memories. Anakin wanted to have that same experience with his Master.

Obi-Wan heated up a meal for them, which they ate sitting in the meadow surrounded by flowers. The morning sun was a brilliant yellow, casting its warmth on Anakin’s skin. He ate quickly, anxious to start the day.

“Qui-Gon and I tracked a Jedi named Winso Bykart,” Obi-Wan said, pushing aside his plate and leaning back on his elbows. “It was our second trip to Ragoon-6. On the first trip, we had to cut the exercise short. I didn’t know why at the time, but Qui-Gon had received a disturbing vision about Tahl.”

## Jude Watson

"I have heard about her," Anakin said. "She was supposed to be brilliant."

"She was. Brilliant and funny and kind. She was unique." Obi-Wan looked out over the meadow. "She was a great friend of Qui-Gon's. I don't know if he ever truly accepted her death."

"But a Jedi must accept death," Anakin said. "It is part of life."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said quietly, his gaze still far away. "That was the difficulty for Qui-Gon."

*What do you mean?* Anakin wanted to ask. But something stopped him. Sometimes, when Obi-Wan spoke of his Master, he became distant. Anakin could tell by the expression on his face. He did not want to intrude by asking prying questions.

Silence fell between them. Anakin was used to that. Usually their silences felt comfortable. This one was not. Anakin watched Obi-Wan's face. He saw the quiet yearning there. Obi-Wan was missing Qui-Gon. And for the first time, it bothered Anakin.

He wasn't feeling jealous of Qui-Gon, Anakin told himself. It wasn't that. He had loved Qui-Gon, too. Something else was bothering him about his Master's preoccupation.

Maybe it was because he was still envious of their relationship. Obi-Wan had taken Anakin on as his Padawan with reluctance. Anakin had always sensed that. Qui-Gon had believed in him, and Qui-Gon's belief had influenced Obi-Wan. How could Obi-Wan ignore his beloved Master's dying wish?

Anakin had thought himself lucky at the time. To arrive at the Temple already chosen by a Jedi Knight! It was unheard of.

Now that he was fourteen, he had seen his fellow Jedi students wait and hope to be chosen by a Jedi Knight. He had talked to his new friend, Tru Veld, about it. Tru had told him about how his Master, Ry-Gaul, had studied him. Tru had felt Ry-Gaul's eyes on him during lightsaber matches, during classes, even walking around the Temple. They had shared many conversations together. When Ry-Gaul had officially chosen Tru at last, he had felt honored.

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Anakin too had always felt honored to be Obi-Wan's Padawan.

*But why?* Anakin suddenly wondered. *Obi-Wan did not choose me.*

Today, for the first time, Anakin saw the difference.

Then a new thought pierced his heart. Had Obi-Wan brought him here as a desperate act, to develop a closeness he did not feel?

## Chapter Two

Obi-Wan didn't dwell on the past. It was not the Jedi way. But his Master was still part of his life, more a constant companion than a memory.

On Ragoon-6 it was hard not to drift back to the past. On his first visit here, Qui-Gon had received a vision that Tahl was in danger. He had not told Obi-Wan. They had left abruptly and had ended up going after Tahl against the wishes of the Council. In that dangerous mission, Qui-Gon's vision had come true. Tahl had died. But not before Qui-Gon had risked everything, including his way on the Jedi path, to declare his love for her.

These were all things Obi-Wan had not known at the time. Some of them Qui-Gon had told him later. Others Obi-Wan had realized himself. Qui-Gon had never spoken of his love for Tahl. It was a place within him too deep for Obi-Wan to go. He was not invited there.

Now he had a Padawan, and he understood Qui-Gon's sense of privacy. There were things it had been better for him not to know.

*But how do you know what to share with your Padawan, and what to keep to yourself?*

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

There were times when Qui-Gon's silence had annoyed or hurt him. Yet in the end, it had not mattered. Nothing had mattered except the bond between them.

He wanted to have this bond with Anakin. He knew it would develop over time. Why was he in such a hurry to make it happen? Something was driving him on, but he did not know what it was. It was as though Anakin would slip out of his grasp if he did not secure him. He had to do all the right things, the way Qui-Gon had done.

Obi-Wan thought back to his second visit to Ragoon-6. It had been close to the time he and Qui-Gon left for Naboo on what would become their last mission together. But on Ragoon-6 that ending was far away. They had enjoyed the tracking exercise, the time together, the break from their missions.

For even then, they had known that the galaxy was changing. Missions were more numerous. Trouble spots erupted constantly. The Senate called for their help more often. It had been difficult to find the time for the training exercise, but Qui-Gon had insisted on it. He had promised Obi-Wan that they would return to Ragoon-6. When Obi-Wan had pointed out that they had plenty of time, a fleeting look of deep sadness had crossed Qui-Gon's face.

"It seems there is always time when you are young," he'd said. "But you cannot hold a moment, Padawan. It runs out like water in your fist. You must seize it when you can, even as it falls away."

Obi-Wan could have kicked himself. He thought at the time that he had reminded Qui-Gon of Tahl. He had, he supposed, but now he also knew that Qui-Gon was thinking of how fast time could pass, and how crowded a life could become.

Remembering this had spurred Obi-Wan on to slot the time for this visit with Anakin. It hadn't been easy. The Jedi Council needed Master-Padawan teams. Yet Yoda and the Council were always careful to grant a request for this training mission. They

## Jude Watson

had seen how many times it had strengthened the ties between a Master and an apprentice.

Would it strengthen theirs? Obi-Wan hoped so. He knew Anakin wasn't looking forward to the exercise as he was. Anakin wanted to be doing serious things. He was anxious to prove himself on missions, anxious to see the galaxy. This time together would be a pause before a future Anakin was eager to meet. Obi-Wan hoped that the exercise would not be too tame for someone as gifted as Anakin.

That was why he had asked Wren to participate. Anakin might smile at how seriously Wren took his role, but he would soon appreciate how challenging Wren's cleverness could be.

Obi-Wan stood. "Come, Padawan. It is time to go."

They took off in the direction Wren had gone. At first, the tracking was easy. Wren had not bothered to hide the clues that a Jedi would catch—a disturbance of leaves on the forest floor, the slight indentation of a heel. After two hours, they were momentarily stumped when they could not locate his direction, until Anakin plucked a silver-gray hair from a leaf, and pointed.

"This way," he said, self-satisfied.

Behind Anakin, Obi-Wan shook his head. Sometimes he felt that there was so little he needed to teach his Padawan. Even to Obi-Wan, who knew him so well, Anakin's command of the Force could be astonishing.

Wren had better come up with his most clever tricks, or Anakin would follow through on his promise and find him by nightfall.

By midday, Anakin and Obi-Wan had to admit they were lost. Wren's clues had grown increasingly difficult, and Anakin's cocky confidence had hardened into dogged resolution.

Frustrated, Anakin suddenly stopped. With one smooth motion, he swiped a rock and tossed it into the woods. It hit a tree with a satisfying thud.

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

"Feel better?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No."

"I didn't think so. Frustration is part of this exercise, young Padawan."

"I know, I know," Anakin muttered. "Breathe in my impatience. Then let it go."

"Correct," Obi-Wan said serenely. He waited a moment. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"I didn't see you breathe." Obi-Wan knew he was straining the patience of his Padawan. Yet these small tests were good lessons.

Obediently, Anakin shut his eyes. He took a breath and released it. He opened one eye. "Can I stop now?"

"I suppose." Obi-Wan grinned. "If Wren could see you now, he'd be very happy."

A gleam of humor lit Anakin's eyes. "The day isn't over yet."

"Come on, let's backtrack," Obi-Wan suggested, heading back down the trail. "We must have taken a wrong turn."

Dappled sunlight streamed through the thick leaves overhead. They moved from pools of light into shadows and back again. The sun warmed their skin, then the shadows cooled it. The air smelled fresh and softly scented. It was a good day to be lost.

Anakin suddenly crouched down and examined the trail. "He stopped here." He pointed to the dirt on the trail.

Obi-Wan bent down. "Yes, I think so."

"Definitely." Anakin's voice rose in excitement. "And then he passed over the grass here. This way."

He led the way off the trail into the forest. Obi-Wan noted the clues and followed. After a morning of looking for tiny changes in the ground and leaves overhead, Wren had left a substantial clue to his progress. It must be part of his strategy to mix up his hard clues with some easier ones.

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Anakin led the way through the dense forest. It was easier to track Wren now. The ground was soft and the leaves underfoot were still wet. Obi-Wan allowed Anakin to take the lead, enjoying the fragrant walk through the trees.

Anakin stopped and turned. "There's a clearing ahead," he said in a hushed tone. "And some caves. Do you think we've caught up with him already? Those marks still look fresh."

"I doubt it," Obi-Wan said. "But proceed carefully. We have to get close in order to end the exercise."

"A lightsaber's length away," Anakin said. "But I think our only chance is to surprise him."

"Anakin—"

Obi-Wan's call was swallowed in the shadows. Anakin ran silently ahead, then dashed out into the clearing.

Obi-Wan followed, wishing he could teach his Padawan to curb his impatience.

He wished this even more when he realized where Wren had led them. They had stumbled on a malia den.

He remembered the malia from his first trip to Ragoon-6. They were fast, agile, deadly creatures, fierce predators with triple rows of teeth.

Anakin stood frozen in the middle of the clearing. He had seen the malia spread out on the rocks. At first their blue-gray fur had melted into the shadows.

*At least they hunt at night.*

He had fought them with Qui-Gon. He remembered the gleam of fluorescent green eyes, the cunning of the creatures as they circled. He did not want to meet up with them again.

"What are they?" Anakin whispered.

"Just...back...up..." Obi-Wan murmured.

But even as they took two steps backward, Obi-Wan saw one creature stir. A long, tapered snout lifted. Two fierce eyes opened. A low rumble deep in the malia's throat told Obi-Wan that they were in trouble.



## Chapter Three

The malia sprang at the same time as Obi-Wan. The creature was just a blue streak in the air. Obi-Wan slashed at it and it fell with a wounded howl.

The rest of the pack rose. Obi-Wan counted swiftly. Sixteen. But there could be more in the caves. They were lean, rangy creatures. One malia stepped forward and lifted its snout. Its eyes flashed as it bared its triple row of yellow teeth.

“Attractive creatures,” Anakin said, his lightsaber at the ready.

“Back up slowly. Perhaps they won’t attack. But if they do, don’t underestimate them,” Obi-Wan said rapidly as he backed up a step. “I fought them with Qui-Gon. They have very quick reflexes. They will come at us from the trees. They will try to separate and surround us.”

Anakin took a cautious step back. “How did you defeat them?”

“We didn’t,” Obi-Wan said. “A native tribe helped us.”

“You needed *help*?” A flicker of nerves crossed Anakin’s face.

“Yes, Anakin. Even Jedi need help occasionally. So just keep backing up...very...very...slowly. Oh, and another thing. Don’t look them in the eye.”

## Jude Watson

“Oops,” Anakin said.

The snarling pack surged forward. Obi-Wan saw a streak of blue as two malia separated from the others and headed for the trees. Another dodged to come at Anakin from his left.

“Anakin—”

“I see it—” Anakin almost stumbled, surprised by the burst of speed the malia took on as it pounced. He barely got his lightsaber lifted in time to slash at the creature’s neck.

Obi-Wan made sure his Padawan had succeeded even as he tracked another malia that was circling toward him from the left. At the same time, he kept his gaze roaming in the trees, where two malia were jumping from branch to branch. “Whatever you do, don’t let any get behind us,” he said as he leaped toward the malia, brandishing his lightsaber. The malia retreated, snarling, its eyes a flash in the shadows.

Anakin whirled to fend off two malia that were attempting to get behind him. At the same time, another malia dropped from the tree.

Obi-Wan leaped toward him to help his Padawan. Back-to-back, the two of them fought the snarling pack.

The air seemed to be full of flying fur and pointed yellow teeth. The malia attacked in a fury. Obi-Wan and Anakin had to use their feet to kick, as well as their lightsabers. Anakin was not yet able to easily use the Force to move living objects, but Obi-Wan was able to send several malia flying with his outstretched left hand.

They continued to back away into the forest. Now they could use the trees as barriers. Anakin fought furiously. The rhythm of the battle took over his actions. His lightsaber was a red blur in the shadows, and his body became a weapon as well. He leaped, kicked, and whirled. He sent a malia flying with a well-timed chop of his hand to the animal’s windpipe. A strangled snarl ended in a yelp as the malia flew backward and hit a tree.

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

There were now eight malia left, half the original pack. Two were limping from the battle. The others circled, snarling. They still bared their teeth and howled at the Jedi, but Obi-Wan could see that their attack had become less focused. They had not expected such resistance.

Next to him, Anakin was breathing hard. His lightsaber was held firmly in his hand. Not even the slightest tremble betrayed how hard he had been working.

“Let’s keep backing up,” Obi-Wan murmured. “Slowly. Do not look at them directly.”

Anakin gritted his teeth. “Believe me, Master. I won’t make that mistake again.”

The malia continued to follow them, but kept a few meters away as the Jedi retreated. Obi-Wan did not blame the malia for the attack. The Jedi had stumbled on their territory. He did not want to wipe out the entire pack.

The Jedi speeded up their pace a bit. The malia did not follow. They huddled together and roared their anger as Obi-Wan and Anakin retreated. The shadows gradually swallowed them up, and soon all the Jedi heard were their angry snarls.

Anakin shivered as he deactivated his lightsaber. “The sound alone is enough to scare you,” he said. “Do you think they’ll follow us?”

“I doubt it. Despite their cunning, they are simple creatures,” Obi-Wan said. “They were defending their home. We were lucky that it was daylight. They weren’t in hunting mode.”

“You mean they would have fought harder?” Anakin asked incredulously.

“And longer.” Obi-Wan tucked his lightsaber back in his belt. “They would not have given up.”

“And here I thought this was such a peaceful planet,” Anakin remarked. “Why would Wren lead us into a malia den? That seems extreme, even for Wren.”

“He wouldn’t,” Obi-Wan said. “We must have misread the clue. Let’s return to the place on the trail where we saw it.”

## Jude Watson

They quickly moved through the trees, retracing their steps. They bent over the clue once again.

"It was my fault," Anakin said. "I saw the grass flattened at the edge of the trail, and I assumed it was Wren." He carefully searched the surrounding ground as Obi-Wan continued to study the disturbance in the dirt.

Anakin was right—it was an impression of a heel. Wren had put too much weight on his foot, enough to leave a mark. It indicated that he had stopped here for a moment. It was an easy clue for the Jedi to follow. Wren had not bothered to try to conceal it or make it harder to read.

It wasn't like him. Then again, maybe it was. Wren enjoyed being inconsistent.

"Master—this way," Anakin called. "This time, I'm sure."

Obi-Wan crossed to the opposite side of the trail. Here, the level ground dropped sharply to a steep rocky hillside.

"Look, here. And here." Anakin left the trail and leaped down the slope from rock to rock. "He went this way."

Obi-Wan followed. It was important to let Anakin lead. That was part of the point of the exercise.

Anakin made his way down the steep slope, his footing sure and swift. They reached the bottom of the slope and immediately plunged into a forest so thick that the overhanging branches shut out all light. They paused for a short moment so that their eyes could adjust. The trees were tall, with long, flat leaves and vast trunks with thick, peeling bark. Anakin began to study the ground again.

Obi-Wan searched without moving, his gaze traveling over the dirt, rocks, and surrounding trees.

Frustrated by his inability to find a clue, Anakin straightened and began to study the trees around them. He hurried forward to a tall trunk and leaned in to examine it.

"He rested here. He touched the trunk with his finger."

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Obi-Wan saw the slight flaking of the bark near Anakin's pointing finger. "How do you know? All the trees here have peeling bark."

"There is sap running alongside. Here's a fingerprint. Smudged. But it's there."

"Yes. So he went—which way?" Obi-Wan enjoyed the keen look in Anakin's eyes.

With the trunk of the tree to guide him, Anakin eagerly searched the ground again. "This way!" he called triumphantly. "We'll catch him yet!"

Smiling, Obi-Wan followed Anakin through the forest. This was what he'd hoped for. Anakin had forgotten his impatience with the exercise and what he'd thought was his secret feeling that it was a waste of time. He was now filled with the excitement of the chase.

They moved through a thick curtain of needles and bark. They could no longer see the mountain looming over them. It was as though they were tucked away in a fragrant green cave.

Then the trees stopped abruptly and they came upon a sheer rock wall. The wall curved around them and rose on three sides. There was no way to go except back the way they'd come.

"It's a dead end," Anakin said, disappointed. "But I was so sure Wren came this way!"

"Hold on," Obi-Wan said. "Look around you. You might be missing something. Remember your Temple exercise to explore the present moment? Close your eyes."

Anakin closed his eyes. Obi-Wan waited until he was sure his Padawan had focused. "What did you see?"

"Bark and leaves under my feet. Sheer wall ten meters ahead with insufficient handholds for climbing. Small plant growing in one crevice thirty meters up. Snow dusting at top of cliff. Bird circling twenty degrees to my right. At the base of the rock wall, what appears to be a small opening—a den of a small animal, or—" Anakin's eyes popped open. "A cave."

## Jude Watson

Obi-Wan smiled. He had seen the entrance to the cave minutes before. "Let's see what it is."

Anakin and Obi-Wan examined the small opening. "It's not as small as it looks," Obi-Wan said. "It could be the nest or den of an animal."

"It looks like it opens up," Anakin said, peering inside. "Let me go in."

Obi-Wan hesitated. He would rather be first. But part of this exercise was also for the Master. He had to learn to let go, to allow his Padawan to test his skills. He knew Anakin was well trained and could handle what lay beyond.

"All right, Padawan."

Without a glow rod, Anakin would have to feel his way. He eased inside the hole carefully, one hand on his lightsaber hilt.

Obi-Wan heard Anakin's voice echo hollowly. "It's a cavern! It's beautiful!"

Obi-Wan squeezed inside the hole. It was a bit more difficult for him to make it. He wondered how the tall, stocky Wren had managed.

He was able to straighten after crawling just a few meters. Anakin stood ahead of him, scanning the cavern.

It truly was beautiful. The walls shimmered with phosphorescence, lighting the space. The cliff face outside had been gray, but this stone was pink with veins of bright gold and silver. Cone-shaped deposits of the stone hung from the ceiling and rose from the floor.

The smooth floor sloped steeply downward. Anakin hurried ahead, running his hand along the wall. "He'll never expect us to find him in here."

Obi-Wan took a deep breath, testing the air. It smelled fresh. There was most likely another opening in the direction they were headed. Wren had probably left the cavern by now.

The air smelled damp as well. That was normal in a cavern. Pools of water sat in the depressions of the stone floor. Some of them quite deep...

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

“Anakin!” Obi-Wan snapped his Padawan’s name. His voice echoed, but Anakin had run ahead, around a corner, and hadn’t heard. Obi-Wan picked up his pace.

He rounded the corner. Anakin had paused before another opening to the cavern. This one was larger and began above Obi-Wan’s shoulders. Through it they could see only a patch of blue-and-violet sky. Against the shimmering pink and gold of the walls it was a breathtaking sight.

“Anakin, we should get out of here,” Obi-Wan called as he quickly made his way toward his Padawan. “I think this cavern may flood periodically.”

Anakin nodded and waited for his Master to catch up. Just then Obi-Wan heard a noise. A slight *whoosh* sound. He moved faster. Anakin turned back to the opening.

“It’s so beautiful,” he said in a hushed tone.

The *whoosh* grew louder. Now it was a roar.

“Hang on!” Obi-Wan shouted as a wall of water suddenly blocked out the sky and headed straight toward them.

## Chapter Four

Anakin desperately clung to a ledge as the water rushed into the cavern. The force of it battered him against the cavern wall. Another wave entered, and the water went over his head. The shock of its coldness almost made him lose his grip.

He fumbled for his breather with one hand while he hung on with the other. He began to feel light-headed as he struggled to attach his breather with one hand. Spots swam before his eyes.

He managed to insert his breather and inhaled deeply. He felt strength flow back into his muscles. Still, his body was being pummeled by the furiously rushing water and battered against the cones and the wall of the cave. He had to get out or he would drown.

He glanced back. He could barely see his Master, who was clinging to a rock hanging from the ceiling. As Anakin watched, Obi-Wan transferred his grip to the next cone. Fighting the rushing water, he pulled himself forward.

Anakin grabbed the ledge a short distance away. He pulled himself forward, too, every muscle straining with his effort. He reached for the next handhold. Then the next. He fought for every centimeter.

At last he felt the smooth curve of the cavern entrance. He paused there, holding on against the violent water, waiting for his



## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Master. After a few moments, Obi-Wan pulled himself up next to Anakin. He pointed up. They would have to let go now and try to get to the surface. Anakin nodded.

Anakin rolled his body into a ball and rested his feet against the cavern wall. He closed his eyes, gathering his strength and the Force. When he felt the Force enter him, he pushed himself off the cavern wall.

The power of the water almost battered him back against the wall and swept him inside the cavern, but Anakin fought it with all his strength, swimming up, trusting that air and sunlight were above.

After a few meters, the pull of the water lessened. He was able to make headway against it. He saw a lightening above. Sunlight. He swam toward it eagerly. The dappled patterns seemed to beckon him.

He burst above the surface of the water. Ahead he saw a booming waterfall, spilling down from a cliff above. That was the source of the powerful current both above and below the surface. Anakin waited until his Master broke the surface and then struck out toward the bank.

He pulled himself up onto dry land. He ripped the breather from his mouth and gasped for breath. Water streamed off his clothes and the ends of his hair as he bent over, gathering his strength. Beside him, Obi-Wan was doing the same.

"The malia den, and now this," Anakin said when he could speak. He shook his head, sending water droplets flying. "Did I misinterpret the clues, Master? They seemed so clear."

"No, I think we went the right way off the trail," Obi-Wan said. "But we shouldn't have gone through the cavern. Jedi clues are designed to be difficult, not life-threatening."

Anakin flushed. It was his fault. In his impatience to impress his Master, he had rushed into the malia den and into the cavern.

## Jude Watson

But Obi-Wan wouldn't say anything. That was the trouble. It was worse for Anakin to have to wonder what his Master was thinking.

Obi-Wan scanned the surrounding area. "No doubt Wren used a cable launcher to vault the cliff face."

"But I didn't see any marks above," Anakin said. "Wouldn't the launcher have scarred the rock face?"

"Let's return and examine the cliff again," Obi-Wan decided.

"I'd rather not take another dip," Anakin said with a shiver.

"We can climb the hill here," Obi-Wan said, scanning the steep incline that rose from the bank. "That will bring us on top of the cliff overlooking the cavern."

They climbed up the steep incline, occasionally using their cable launchers. The sunlight dried their clothes and hair and warmed them as they climbed high above the water. At last they reached the top of the cliff.

Anakin stood at the top. From here he had a commanding view of the waterfall below and, in the distance, the valley. Still more mountains rose behind him.

He turned and found the overlook to the forest's edge below. It didn't take him long to find where Wren had been.

"Look, Master. He was here," he said, pointing to a place where the grass was flattened. "He could have been watching from above while we stood there."

"Possibly," Obi-Wan said. "There was no way for him to know that the cavern would flood, I suppose."

"At least we know for sure that we have him," Anakin said. His Master still looked uncertain. "Don't we?"

"Let's follow the trail," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin moved to track Wren's progress over the top of the cliff. A trail led into the mountains, and he began to trudge up it.

He could sense that his Master was uneasy. Something was bothering him. But Obi-Wan did not confide.

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

*He never does, Anakin thought. How can we get closer if he keeps all his thoughts to himself?*

He had to speak or he would burst. Anakin stopped and turned around. "You never tell me what you're thinking," he said.

Obi-Wan stopped. "You should be careful when you use words like 'never' and 'always,' Padawan," he said. "Things are rarely so absolute. You should be more precise. Clarity of mind is important for a Jedi."

*Another lesson. Must there be so many?* "Yes, Master." Anakin turned and continued up the mountain. He had only gone a few meters when he realized that Obi-Wan had never addressed what he'd said.

*That's because he knows it's true. He had perfect communication with Qui-Gon, and he knows he can never achieve that with me.*

He had been right all along. This exercise was a waste of time.

The trail rose higher, and the temperature began to drop. The sun still warmed them, so they did not need their thermal capes. But above, Anakin could see the snowy peaks, and he knew if they kept climbing at this rate, they would encounter snow by dusk.

Anakin felt shivers on the back of his neck. But it wasn't the temperature. Something was wrong. He tested the feeling. The Force was like a net, closing around him. The trees seemed to hang over the trail, menacing them. The sky seemed lower.

*We're being watched.*

And whoever it was, it wasn't another Jedi.

Anakin glanced at Obi-Wan. He did not move his head, only his eyes, so that if someone were watching they would not see even a wordless communication. Obi-Wan's gaze told him everything he needed to know. He, too, felt the presence of someone.

Obi-Wan stopped, and Anakin did the same. "We should split up," he said in a tone loud enough to carry, but not too loud

## Jude Watson

to be obvious. “We’re getting nowhere. I’ll head back, and you continue ahead.”

“Yes, Master.” Anakin knew that Obi-Wan would double back in order to trap whoever was following them.

Obi-Wan moved back down the trail, and Anakin continued on. He did not feel fear or alarm. He felt ready for whatever would come.

He reached out to the Force beyond the trail, beyond his immediate surroundings. He took in the planet in a way he was learning to do.

There was darkness here, but the feeling was confused. He could not pinpoint why or how the Force was affected. *That was the trouble*, Anakin thought ruefully. He could access the Force easily. Interpreting it was another matter. At such times he fully realized why he was still a Padawan, and not a Jedi.

He was on a switchback trail now that hugged the mountain as it rose. As Anakin turned a corner, the trail behind him would disappear. The rocks rose steeply on his left and a sheer drop was on his right. If he met whoever was following him, the battle would be tricky. And how would Obi-Wan manage to set up an ambush on this kind of terrain?

Anakin was busy thinking these thoughts when he turned the next corner and saw the flash of a weapon. It was held by a young woman in a gray cloak that blended with the rocks.

“Don’t come any farther,” she said in a clear voice. “I promise you, I know how to use this. And it is aimed straight at your heart.”

## Chapter Five

Anakin waited. The Force was around him, rising up from the ground beneath his feet and the forest below. It was not strong in the girl. Anakin guessed she was close to his age. She was afraid, he suddenly knew. He felt her fear ripple out and touch him, as clearly as if she had put out a hand.

And he felt something else—his Master was near. Obi-Wan was above him. He needed to keep the girl's attention on him.

"Why do you want to shoot me?" he asked in a reasonable tone.

"Do not try to trick me," she said. "I know you've been following me. I know you killed my friends and my teacher." Now her voice wobbled slightly. "I won't let you kill me, too."

Anakin saw a blur above. It was his Master, leaping down from the sheer cliff above.

Obi-Wan dropped behind the girl and disarmed her in a move so fast she did not have time to turn or even take a breath.

Obi-Wan tossed the weapon to Anakin.

"You know how to use a *hydrospanner*?" Anakin asked in disbelief.

"I didn't have a real weapon," she said in a small voice.

## Jude Watson

"Were you threatening to kill me, or fix my speeder?" Anakin asked. He couldn't believe he had been fooled by a hydrospanner. What kind of Jedi was he?

In answer, the girl suddenly whirled and tried to throw herself down the sheer drop. Obi-Wan had anticipated the move and simply reached out with one hand and stopped her.

"That's not a solution," he said. "We're not going to hurt you. Maybe we can even help you."

Anakin took a few steps closer. "What happened? What do you mean, somebody killed your friends?"

The girl pulled her cloak around her. Her hood fell back, and waves of long blond hair spilled down her back.

"My name is Floria," she said. "I'm from the planet Aaeton, only half-day's journey from here. Young people from my planet often go on survival camping trips on Ragoon-6 when we reach fourteen years of age. We have a special allowance from the Senate because we gave the elders of Ragoon refuge when they handed the planet over to the Senate. My group arrived yesterday. I was separated from them. We were on a hike and I got lost." Floria's eyes suddenly filled with tears. "When I returned...I...the ship..."

"Go on," Obi-Wan prompted.

She swallowed. "Was completely burned," she said in a whisper. "I knew we were supposed to meet back there for the evening meal. I am afraid my friends and my teacher were in it. Someone blew it up."

"You're sure they were inside?"

She twisted her hands together. "How can I be sure of anything? Everything was smoke and ash and fire. Maybe they escaped. Maybe they are lost. I've been searching ever since. But lately I am positive that someone has been following me. They were keeping just out of sight."

"More than one being?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I—I'm not sure," Floria stammered. "I don't know what's wrong. I just know that something is. And I'm all alone!"

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

*So I was right about the darkness in the Force, Anakin thought. Something is wrong on this planet.*

"Dry your tears," Anakin said gently. "You're not alone. We will help you."

"Who are you?" she asked. "And why would you help me?"

"Because we can," Obi-Wan said. "Now, the first thing to do is examine your ship."

The ship was just as Floria had described it—a charred hulk.

"Stay here with her," Obi-Wan told Anakin. He disappeared inside the remains of the ship.

He emerged a few minutes later, his face streaked with ash. "There are no remains of beings aboard," he said.

Floria closed her eyes in relief for a moment. "Thank you for looking."

"This is a small cruiser," Anakin said, looking at the ship. "It's for travel within a planetary atmosphere. How did you get here from Aaeton?"

"We have a space cruiser in orbit," Floria explained. "We're supposed to rendezvous with them in three hours. But I have no way to contact them to tell them we won't be there." She brightened. "Can you take me? I can tell them what happened, and they'll send a rescue party down."

"Of course," Obi-Wan said. "We'll have to hike to our cruiser, but it's not far."

"Thank you," Floria said. "I feel certain now that my friends are alive. But they could be in danger. We must find them."

Obi-Wan drew Anakin aside. "Something dark is present on this planet. Can you feel it?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes, Master. But it is unclear."

"There seems to be different energies operating," Obi-Wan said. "It is unclear to me, too. We must be on our guard." He frowned. "I have been thinking about Wren."

"What about him?" Anakin asked.

## **Jude Watson**

“The clues we have been following...something is wrong. They are too easy, and they lead us to danger. Maybe Wren isn’t the one leaving them.” Obi-Wan gazed up at the mountain. “Something might have happened to him.”



## Chapter Six

*You never tell me what you're thinking.*

Why hadn't he answered his Padawan? Instead, he had corrected him. Obi-Wan's mind churned, and his heart felt heavy. He did not know why he had deflected Anakin's feelings, but he knew he had been deeply unfair to his Padawan.

Anakin could speak so easily of his feelings. He often spoke without thinking, often spilled out exactly what was in his heart. It was behavior that was not like a Jedi.

*And I correct him. Is that right?*

Obi-Wan knew why Anakin was this way. It was because of Shmi. Anakin's mother had given him a great gift. She had given him an open heart. His feelings were deep and spontaneous. That was a good thing. But they sometimes led him to act too fast, to make quick judgments.

*He is the opposite of me,* Obi-Wan thought. *It has always been difficult for me to speak what is in my heart.*

Anakin had been wrong to say he never told him anything. Obi-Wan only held back what he thought Anakin did not need to know, just as Qui-Gon had done with him. Obi-Wan had begun to suspect that Wren's clues were not right, but he felt it was better for Anakin to discover this on his own. He could see that Anakin's eagerness to find Wren was clouding his judgment.

## Jude Watson

Perhaps Anakin was being less careful because he was not on a mission, but an exercise.

These were things it was not proper for a Master to share with his Padawan. Yet Anakin wanted Obi-Wan to share everything.

Sighing, Obi-Wan led the way back to their ship. He would have to think of a way to bring up what had happened. He knew he had hurt Anakin's feelings.

Obi-Wan knew the terrain by now and led them down the mountain and across rocky hills and meadows so they would not have to double back, which would have cost them time. Within two hours, they were hiking across the meadow toward the cliff face where Wren had docked the ship.

"Don't worry," Anakin said reassuringly to Floria. "We have a comm unit aboard ship, so—Master! Look at that. It's beautiful..." Anakin frowned, sensing something was wrong.

Obi-Wan saw the fine blue mist heading for them. "Anakin, move!"

Anakin's reflexes were perfect. Without thinking, he leaped to one side as Obi-Wan vaulted toward Floria. He grabbed her and jumped, accessing the Force.

The spray hit the ground where Anakin and Floria had been standing.

"Stokhli spray stick," Obi-Wan said. "Keep moving."

"A what?" Floria asked.

Another burst of spray headed their way. Obi-Wan jumped again, still holding Floria against his side, as he tried to pinpoint the location of their attacker.

"It's a weapon," Anakin explained as they ran toward cover. "It sends a spraynet mist with a stun current. You don't want it to hit you."

"I guess not," Floria muttered as Obi-Wan gained the shelter of some boulders and pushed her behind them.

"We have to circle around and stop whoever is doing this," Obi-Wan said to Anakin. "Stay here, Floria."

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

She gazed at him with wide, frightened eyes. “Don’t worry. Just come back again.”

“If you head for those trees, I’ll circle around the boulders and see if I can surprise the attacker,” Obi-Wan told Anakin. “Remember, the Stokhli stick has a range of two hundred meters.”

“Makes it hard to get close enough with a lightsaber,” Anakin said.

“Exactly,” Obi-Wan murmured. “Just leave that to me. Keep the attacker busy. And don’t take chances!”

“Yes, Master.”

Anakin ran out from the shelter of the boulders. Obi-Wan waited for a moment until he saw the spray of the Stokhli stick spew into the air. Anakin Force-jumped, and Obi-Wan could see that the spray would miss him by centimeters.

His Padawan’s reflexes and timing were extraordinary. Anakin had timed his move so that the spray would miss him, but by so small a margin that the attacker would be diverted and want to attack again. His concentration would stay on Anakin.

Obi-Wan bent over so he could keep the shelter of the boulders as far as possible. He ran around them, then timed his move to the second attack on Anakin. He dashed across the open meadow toward the screen of trees.

He made the trees without an attack. Now the rest would be tricky. Anakin would keep himself just out of range of the Stokhli—he hoped—but Obi-Wan’s objective was to get close enough to disarm the attacker. That meant he would have to be squarely in the stick’s range.

Obi-Wan took off through the trees, heading toward where he had last pinpointed the attacker. No doubt the attacker would keep moving, especially when he or she realized that Obi-Wan was gone. He would count on Anakin’s skill to prevent the attacker from moving too far or too fast.

Soon Obi-Wan stopped. He concentrated, accessing the Force to become one with the environment around him. The

## Jude Watson

sounds of the forest dropped away. He did not hear the rustle of leaves in the wind, the occasional scurry of a small animal, the rub of a branch against another. He only heard the slight *ssiiing* sound of the spray stick.

Thirty degrees to his right. Obi-Wan moved carefully now, moving behind tree trunk to tree trunk. He barely touched the ground as he moved, making no sound.

*Sssing!* Another attack from the Stokhli stick. Coming from a few meters to the right of where he'd pinpointed the attacker.

Now Obi-Wan moved quickly, running over the soft ground, his boots silent, his breathing so controlled he made no sound.

He saw the attacker ahead. It was a male Tursha. Obi-Wan saw the distinctive headtails and the eleven-fingered hands lightly holding the Stokhli stick. The Tursha was just behind the tree line.

Obi-Wan drew his lightsaber and jumped. The Tursha turned, his Stokhli stick spewing mist. Instead of leaping to the side, Obi-Wan jumped high. He anticipated that the Tursha would move the stick in a sweeping motion to cover as much air as possible, and he did. Obi-Wan sailed over the mist, his lightsaber high.

The Tursha had fast reflexes. He moved back, putting himself in the open, past the tree line. Obi-Wan saw Anakin leap toward him.

Obi-Wan came down. He kept his lightsaber away from the Tursha. He did not want to kill or injure him. He wanted answers.

Anakin's lightsaber was drawn as well. The Tursha moved a fraction, enough so that the spray from the stick would put Anakin securely in range. Obi-Wan moved fast. He leaped again, this time adding momentum in midair in a Jedi method that never failed to surprise opponents. He kicked out with one foot at the handle of the stick. He gave his blow topspin, and the stick flew out of the surprised Tursha's hand and then twisted in

## **STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi**

midair. Though Obi-Wan didn't plan it this way, the spray hit the Tursha full in the face.

He fell to his knees. He gazed out in shock at Anakin and the meadow beyond.

"They...were...mine," he managed to gasp out, before the spray paralyzed him completely. He slumped against a tree trunk, his face frozen in a surprised expression.

## Chapter Seven

“Who is he?” Floria asked in a hushed voice. She tiptoed closer, keeping behind Anakin.

Obi-Wan bent over the inert form. He examined the Tursha’s utility belt and searched the hidden pockets in his cloak.

“I’d guess he’s a bounty hunter,” he said to Anakin. “He has a variety of weapons and what looks to be some false ID docs.” He took a restraining device from the bounty hunter’s belt and secured him to the tree.

“You’ll recover from the stun in about five hours,” he told the Tursha, who could do nothing but stare straight ahead. “But I guess you know that. We’ll return for you.”

“Can’t you ask him what happened to my friends?” Floria asked.

“He can’t speak. Not yet. If he did attack your friends, we’ll escort him to your home planet for trial,” Obi-Wan said.

Suddenly, tears spilled down Floria’s cheeks. “He killed them,” she said. “I know it. Did you hear what he said? ‘They were mine.’ He did it.”

“You don’t know that,” Anakin told her soothingly. “He could have meant any number of things. We don’t know anything about him. You can’t jump to conclusions that way. You can’t imagine the worst.”

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Anakin patted Floria's shoulder as she used the hem of her cloak to dry her tears. Despite his reassuring words, he was worried. He had felt the growing darkness on the planet. Floria could be right. Her friends could have been attacked.

Obi-Wan stared out at the meadow, thinking. He did not acknowledge Floria's tears, or try to soothe her in any way. Anakin couldn't believe it. How could Obi-Wan be so cold?

Obi-Wan signaled to Anakin and drew him aside. "What is a bounty hunter doing on an unpopulated planet?" he asked. "Why would he attack us? Is he here for another purpose? Why would he attack a group of young students on a camping trip? It doesn't make sense."

"But they've disappeared," Anakin said. "Something happened."

Obi-Wan eyed the Tursha. "I wish I could ask him some questions. I'd like to know if he's operating alone."

"We're running out of time," Anakin said. "Floria's group is supposed to rendezvous with the space cruiser in less than an hour."

"You are too focused on Floria's problem," Obi-Wan rebuked him. "There is a larger issue here, and possibly more important things at stake. What is happening on this planet? We won't find out if we leave."

"We have to leave," Anakin said. "We promised Floria."

"We promised to help her," Obi-Wan said. "I'm not sure what that will entail. Not yet. Have you given no thought to your fellow Jedi? What if something happened to Wren?"

"We don't know that," Anakin argued. "And we do know that something happened to Floria's friends. So I say we go with what we know. Aren't I supposed to tune into my feelings?"

An odd look passed over his Master's face. "Your feelings are important, Padawan," he said kindly. "And they are important to me. But you are being swayed by emotion. That is different from following your feelings. You should know the

## Jude Watson

difference by now. Gather the Force around you. See what it tells you.”

Annoyed at Obi-Wan’s rebuke, Anakin turned away. He gazed at the trees, letting the tones of green invade him, letting the noise of the rustling leaves calm him. He gathered in the Force.

Once again, he felt the darkness rise. Once again, it seemed to be coming from several sources. Yet there was one powerful darkness here as well.

Surprised, he turned to Obi-Wan. “It is confusing. There seem to be several sources of darkness, and at the same time, only one.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “That is what I sense, too.”

“But I don’t get any feeling about Wren. Perhaps he is in danger,” Anakin said reluctantly. He didn’t want Obi-Wan to be right.

“Let’s go to the ship,” Obi-Wan suggested. “We’ll try to raise Wren on his comlink. Then we will make the decision about Floria.” He put his hand on Anakin’s shoulder. “Together.”

Anakin nodded. He realized that Obi-Wan had just given him a kind of apology. It was just like Obi-Wan to veil it in lessons.

They returned to the girl, who had slumped on the ground a good distance away from the bounty hunter.

“Come on,” Anakin said. “We’re heading for the ship.”

“Good.” She rose with a shiver. “I can’t wait to get off this planet.”

“One moment. We can’t leave the Tursha like this,” Obi-Wan said. “When dusk comes, the malia will be roaming.” He withdrew a flexible tarp from his survival pack. He unfurled it and created a free-form tent around the seated bounty hunter. The color of the tarp took on the color of its surroundings, camouflaging the Tursha. “This should protect you somewhat,” Obi-Wan told him. “We will return for you before the paralyzer wears off.”



## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

They left the trees and struck out across the meadow. Anakin hoped they would be able to raise Wren on the comlink. He was anxious to bring Floria to safety. Suddenly their training exercise had turned into a mission. He didn't mind the shift. He would rather face danger and save lives than track an elder Jedi up a mountain any day.

They were relieved to see that the ship was just as they'd left it. They hurried toward it.

Suddenly, the ground in front of them exploded, sending a shower of dirt and rocks into the air. Another explosion came to the right of them.

They were being fired on—from all directions at once. The blaster bolts pinged and whistled, sending up showers of dirt around them.

Anakin and Obi-Wan both activated their lightsabers in one fluid motion.

"Get Floria to the ship!" Obi-Wan yelled, deflecting fire.

Anakin tucked Floria against his side, away from the worst of the fire. He ran quickly, deflecting fire as he moved.

Obi-Wan stayed in front of him, taking the brunt of the fire and clearing a path to the ship. Anakin activated the landing ramp and quickly ran up with Floria. After a moment, Obi-Wan followed.

Anakin slid into the pilot's seat. "We don't have time to contact Wren. We'd better get out of here."

"Yes, hurry!" Floria's face was white with fear. "What if they come after this ship, too?"

Obi-Wan peered outside at the blaster fire that was still erupting. Bolts peppered the ship. Smoke filled the air outside.

Anakin reached for the engine controls.

"Wait." Obi-Wan's voice was a command.

"Wait?" Floria's voice rose. "For what? To get killed?"

"I feel a surge in the Force," Obi-Wan said.

"You feel a what in the *what*?" Floria's head whipped from Obi-Wan to Anakin.

## Jude Watson

An explosion outside the ship almost threw Obi-Wan to the floor. Floria screamed and gripped her chair. "Please, let's take off!"

Obi-Wan gripped the console, concentrating, as though there were no blasters, no explosions outside. And now Anakin could feel it, too. The dark side surged. He had been too intent on leaving, on Floria's panic, on the blaster fire. This was something he had to learn. His connection to the Force was strong, but sometimes it got crowded out by more immediate things. Obi-Wan was able to hold everything in his mind at once.

Obi-Wan dropped to his knees. Floria looked down at him as though he were crazy.

"Is he afraid?" she whispered to Anakin. "I don't blame him! Let's take off!"

"Wait." Anakin watched Obi-Wan. He knew now that the darkness was in the ship, not outside it.

"I found it." Obi-Wan's voice was muffled, and Anakin had to strain to hear over the sound of the blaster fire.

Obi-Wan raised his head, then stood. He held a black box in his hand. "A sleeper bomb. If we had taken off, we would have been blown out of the sky."

## Chapter Eight

Floria looked as though she might faint. “A bomb? Can you d-defuse it?”

“I’m afraid not,” Obi-Wan said. “It could go off at any time. So let’s go.”

“The comlinks—” Anakin said.

“No time. Go!” Obi-Wan ordered, leaning forward to access the landing ramp.

Floria was already out of her chair and running to the exit. Obi-Wan pushed Anakin ahead of him and they hurried after her, leaving the bomb behind.

As they raced down the ramp, Obi-Wan caught a glimpse of a figure dressed in black at the cargo door. He was trying to sneak aboard.

Floria screamed, and the bomb went off. Obi-Wan was blown off his feet. The figure in black went flying as well. Smoke rolled over them. Obi-Wan raised his head, trying to see. Coughing against the acrid smoke in his mouth, he struggled to his knees.

Obi-Wan peered through the rolling smoke to make sure Anakin and Floria were all right. Anakin was already standing and bending down to help a coughing Floria to rise.

## Jude Watson

“Anakin, check the area!” Obi-Wan shouted as he headed for the figure in black.

The figure rose shakily. Stumbling and falling, he attempted to run away. Obi-Wan raced toward him.

He had almost reached him when he felt something heavy land on his back. Hands covered his eyes. Hair brushed against his face.

Obi-Wan tried to twist away. “Floria?”

Suddenly the young slender girl had the moves of an assassin. She used a variety of intricate holds to slow down Obi-Wan while he struggled to move toward the figure in black. He tried to shake her off, but he didn’t want to harm her.

Hands covered his eyes, and he carefully pried them off.

“I don’t want to hurt you...” he said.

She didn’t answer, just wound one leg around his, trying to trip him, while she grabbed his ear.

“That’s enough.” Obi-Wan grabbed her wrists and expertly flipped her over and down onto the ground. Her breath left her as she landed hard.

The figure in black hesitated. It was easy for Obi-Wan to stride forward and grab him by the scruff of the neck.

“All right, you two. What’s going on?” he asked sternly.

Anakin ran back to him. “The blaster fire and explosions were set off by timed devices.” He looked at Floria, who gazed up at Obi-Wan furiously from the ground. Then he looked at the squirming figure in Obi-Wan’s grip. “What’s going on?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.” Obi-Wan threw back the figure’s black hood. Close-cropped blond hair and wide eyes the same brilliant blue as Floria’s met his. The boy was only a few years older than Floria.

Obi-Wan looked at Floria. “Your brother, I presume.”

The boy shot Floria a look clearly intended to keep her silent. Obi-Wan sighed. “Anakin, check his pack.”

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Anakin picked up a small pack the boy had worn on his back. He opened it and went through it. "Just some basic survival gear. A tarp and some rations."

Obi-Wan gave the boy a little shake. "I'm losing patience."

"Dane, we've been double-crossed," Floria said, rising gingerly and rubbing her elbow. "Why shouldn't we tell them? I'm getting a bad feeling about this planet. There was a sleeper bomb aboard that ship! That's totally against the rules!"

Dane said nothing.

"What rules?" Anakin asked.

"Now we're stuck here with the Jedi with no way to get off the planet," Floria continued. "We destroyed that ship for nothing. You and your big ideas!"

"You destroyed your own ship?" Anakin asked in disbelief.

"Cooperation doesn't seem like such a bad idea, considering the circumstances," Floria said, still speaking to her brother.

Dane shrugged. "So things didn't work out. They could have."

"But they didn't," Floria said.

"But they could have," Dane shot back.

"Who *are* you two?" Obi-Wan asked angrily, his patience exhausted.

"Bounty hunters," Floria said.

Anakin and Obi-Wan exchanged an incredulous look. These two young people, bounty hunters?

"Who are you hunting?" Anakin asked.

"You," Floria told him. "We're supposed to find the Jedi and bring you back, dead or alive."

"Bring us back where?" Obi-Wan asked. "Who hired you?"

"Let me just point out that we weren't going to kill you," Floria said quickly, not answering Obi-Wan's question. "We weren't the ones that planted the sleeper bomb, obviously."

"What about that blaster fire?" Anakin asked.

## Jude Watson

“We knew you could handle that. We just wanted to add a little urgency to the situation,” Dane said. “You’d take off if you thought you were under attack.”

“We didn’t want to kill you,” Floria assured them. “We don’t kill beings. We just trick them. Just like we tricked you. It would have worked if there hadn’t been that bomb. Listen, tricking is much safer.”

“Are you actually successful at this?” Anakin asked.

Floria and Dane exchanged a look. Floria sighed. “Nobody ever believes we’re bounty hunters. It’s so insulting. Yes, we’re successful. Take our last case. We—”

“Who hired you?” Obi-Wan asked in frustration, interrupting her brusquely.

“If you’re going to confess everything, you might try to be organized about it,” Dane said to Floria. “You always get off the subject.”

“I don’t,” Floria protested.

“You do, too. Always.”

“You shouldn’t say always,” Anakin broke in. “Absolutes are rarely true.”

“Enough!” Obi-Wan roared. “Who hired you? I want answers, and I want them now.”

Obi-Wan’s thunderous look cowed Floria and Dane.

“Granta Omega,” Floria said. “Do you know him? He’s on his ship, orbiting the planet. Our plan was to lure you onto your own ship and get you to pilot it to what you’d think was my rendezvous ship but was actually Omega’s transport. Then we’d leave you there, collect the reward, and take off. Easy, right?”

“Obviously not, since you’re standing here with us now,” Obi-Wan said. “So who put the sleeper bomb on the ship?”

“I don’t know,” Floria admitted.

“It could be anyone,” Dane said. “Omega hired four other bounty hunters besides us. The first one to succeed wins the prize—and it’s an enormous fortune. The only rule is that the bounty hunters aren’t allowed to harm one another.”

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

“Obviously, someone broke the rules,” Floria said disapprovingly. “I could have died aboard that ship.”

“Not to mention us,” Anakin said.

“What about the other Jedi?” Obi-Wan asked.

“He’s not part of the deal,” Dane said. “We’re supposed to go after the Master–Padawan team. That was it.”

“What information were you given about us?” Obi-Wan asked. “How did you know where to find us?”

“We knew you were on a training mission on Ragoon-6,” Floria said. “That’s all.”

*That’s all? That’s too much.* Obi-Wan couldn’t believe it. The training missions weren’t secret. But Jedi did not speak of them to outsiders. Of course, there were those in the Senate who knew about them. And Senators, Obi-Wan knew too well, could be bribed.

“Tell me about the other bounty hunters,” Obi-Wan said. “Do you know them?”

Dane nodded. “They are well known to those who know about these things. Teleq is one. We know him by reputation only. He’s known for his cunning use of technology. Then there is Mol Arcasite. She is ruthless. She will take innocent lives to get what she wants. And she doesn’t care if she brings her prey back dead. Most bounty hunters prefer to catch beings alive. It saves them a possible security arrest themselves. You never know who might be watching.”

“Mol gives us all a bad name,” Floria said. “Come to think of it, she could have planted that sleeper bomb. It’s just her style.”

“What about the bounty hunter with the Stokhli stick?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Don’t know him,” Floria said. “He was awfully good. But he almost blew my cover when he saw me. I couldn’t believe it when he said ‘They were mine.’”

## Jude Watson

“So he was talking about us,” Anakin said, indicating himself and Obi-Wan. “And you made us think you were concerned about your friends!”

Floria’s eyes shone. “Wasn’t I good?”

“She can cry on cue,” Dane confided.

“Who is the last bounty hunter?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Hunti Pereg,” Dane answered. “He has the most awesome reputation of all. He has never failed to capture his prey. Not once.”

“Of course, he has never met the Jedi,” Floria rushed to assure them.

Obi-Wan gave her an exasperated look. “Neither have you. If you had, you’d know we can see through flattery. You think Hunti Pereg can catch us.”

“Well, he *is* very good,” Floria said.

Obi-Wan stood, thinking a moment. Now he knew that those vague feelings had a source, after all. He knew one thing for sure: Wren had not left those clues. One of the bounty hunters had.

It was time to contact the Temple. A Jedi was in danger. He could feel it. But their comlinks had been blown up with the ship.

“We were deliberately led into that malia den,” he told Anakin. “And the cavern. Someone left those clues for us to follow.”

“Which means that Wren...” Anakin began.

“Has been captured or possibly even killed,” Obi-Wan finished gravely. “But why? Why is this Granta Omega after us? What else do you know about him?”

“Not much. We’ve never seen him. We’ve communicated through comm channels. The only thing we know is that he is the richest being in the galaxy,” Floria said.

“Not *the* richest,” Dane corrected. “You always exaggerate.”

“Okay, *one* of the richest,” Floria said.

“Why has he targeted the Jedi?” Anakin asked.



## **STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi**

Floria and Dane shook their heads. "We don't know," Floria said. "In this business, you don't ask too many questions. It's better not to get too involved."

"Speaking of which, hanging around with you two might be dangerous to our health," Dane said. "So if you don't mind, Floria and I will take our chances on Ragoon." He grabbed Floria's hand and began to edge away.

Obi-Wan blocked their path. "Not a chance," he said firmly. "You're not going anywhere until we find out exactly what's going on. We might need your help."

"What help could we possibly be?" Floria asked. "We told you everything we know."

"I'm sure you did not," Obi-Wan said. "You know the bounty hunters who are after us. You're not going anywhere until we know more about who is after us...and why."

## Chapter Nine

“So, what now?” Anakin asked Obi-Wan.

“When you are the hunted, the best thing to do is to turn the tables,” Obi-Wan said. “You must become the hunter.”

“Track the bounty hunters,” Anakin said.

Obi-Wan nodded. “We can start with the sleeper bomb. It needed a nearby power source to gather sufficient charge for someone to set it off. We need to find the power source, which won’t be far.”

“Whoa, wait a second,” Floria said. “I didn’t sign on for this. If you’re going to chase down the rest of the bounty hunters, you’ve got to let us go. This could be dangerous.”

“Bounty hunting isn’t dangerous?” Anakin asked.

“We minimize our risks,” Dane said. He hooked his fingers into his thick black utility belt. “Which doesn’t seem to be a consideration for Jedi.”

“When it comes down to it, we just aren’t very brave,” Floria confessed.

“Speak for yourself, Floria,” Dane said, scowling.

Floria ignored him. “So it’s in your best interests to let us go. I tend to scream when trouble happens. And after all, it isn’t fair. Bounty hunters are chasing you, not us. Why put us in harm’s way?”

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

“Let me ask you something,” Obi-Wan said. “Don’t you think the bounty hunter knew you were aboard our ship before activating the signal?”

Floria bit her lip. “You mean we’re a target, too?”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “Think about it. After all, the fewer bounty hunters there are, the easier it is to win the prize.”

“But there are rules!” Floria protested. “Bounty hunters are forbidden to attack one another.”

“In my experience, the larger the reward, the greater the chance rules will be broken,” Obi-Wan said.

“Granta Omega wouldn’t stand for it,” Floria said, but she sounded less certain.

“Would you bet your life on the ethics of a being who is using bounty hunters to trap Jedi on a training exercise?” Obi-Wan asked mildly.

Floria was silent.

Obi-Wan waited while the sister and brother exchanged a glance. He was not about to let Floria and Dane go. Despite their assurances that they weren’t dangerous, the reward would still tempt them to make trouble for the Jedi. Obi-Wan had no doubt that he and Anakin could handle any attack the bounty-hunting team could launch at them, but he’d rather not have to deal with it at all so he could focus on rescuing Wren and getting to the bottom of who was behind this.

He wanted them close. But it was better that they think it was in their best interests to stay with the Jedi.

“I think you’ve got us there,” Dane told him. “Lead on.”

With Floria and Dane in tow, Obi-Wan and Anakin began a systematic search. They walked outward from their ship in widening circles.

“The power source for that size sleeper bomb has to be a generator that’s fairly large,” Obi-Wan said. “I’m guessing it’s on a cruiser of some kind.”

## Jude Watson

"If the power source is on a cruiser, the bounty hunter could be long gone," Floria called to them as she brought up the rear.

"Not if the prize is as big as you say," Obi-Wan answered.

Their route took them over a rocky hill and down into another low-lying meadow. The ground was mushy beneath their feet. Ahead lay a boggy field full of shoulder-high bushes with bright yellow flowers.

Floria reached out to pick one. "Ow!" She sucked her finger.

Now they could see that red thorns surrounded the bright flowers.

"I guess we have to turn back," Floria said hopefully. "We'll be torn to shreds if we try to make it through these bushes."

Obi-Wan hesitated. Floria was right. But their only chance of finding the power source lay in examining the surrounding area.

"Master," Anakin said quietly.

Obi-Wan heard it, too. The faint whine of a cruiser engine. He searched the sky and saw nothing.

"Everyone get down low," he said.

They crouched underneath the bushes in a hollowed-out spot while Obi-Wan and Anakin scanned the sky.

The cruiser darted into view, a flash of silver against the blue.

"Fast, agile," Anakin reported, squinting at it. "Laser cannons mounted on either side of the bridge."

"It's Mol Arcasite's cruiser," Dane said. "I recognize it. She had it techno-tweaked by Sienar's Advanced Projects. Uh-oh."

The cruiser had made a sharp turn and now headed straight toward them.

Dane looked around. "What are we going to do? There's no place to hide. And if we go back we'll be caught in the open."

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Obi-Wan withdrew his lightsaber and activated it. He leaned forward and expertly sliced through the thorny bush. The bush melted away.

“Those things sure come in handy,” Floria said admiringly.

The cruiser darted lower. The laser cannons suddenly burst into a clatter of rapid fire.

“Move!” Obi-Wan urged as the fire scorched the bushes behind them. He darted through the hole he’d created with his lightsaber, swinging it in a short arc in order to clear the way farther into the brush.

Anakin pushed Floria through and waited for Dane to dart in before following. Obi-Wan used the lightsaber with a fine-honed precision, cutting a hole in the bush just below the surface so that the bushes would seem intact from the air. There would be no telltale path to advertise their progress.

Obi-Wan moved fast, but in a wide zigzag over the length of the field. They grew tired and sweaty and were scratched by the long, sharp thorns. Still, Obi-Wan pushed on, making Mol Arcasite dive again and again over the thorny field. At times the cannon fire was so close Obi-Wan could feel the heat from the blaster bolts.

“Is this a plan?” Dane asked. A long scratch went from his ear to his nose. “Because it doesn’t seem like a plan. Are you trying to tire out a cruiser?”

Obi-Wan didn’t answer. He had brought them to the edge of the field. Ahead was another rocky hill, the beginning of the foothills to the mountains.

“Stay here,” Obi-Wan told Floria and Dane. “Anakin, follow me.”

He stepped out into the open. He held his lightsaber high.

“She’s had to fly low and buzz us continually,” he told Anakin. “I see some slight smoke from the forward laser cannon.”

“She could be overheating,” Anakin said. “That’s why you kept her moving.”

## Jude Watson

“Exactly. Now let’s keep going.”

It was a challenge, but the Jedi moved fast, using the natural formation of the steep hill and the surrounding boulders for cover. Again and again, Mol Arcasite dived toward them, laser cannons blasting, but they used the deep rocky overhangs for cover.

“I’m going to try something,” Obi-Wan told Anakin. “Keep her occupied down here.”

As soon as the cruiser banked and turned for another approach, Obi-Wan leaped up to an overhang, then jumped to the next, and the next. Now he was above the low-flying cruiser, which was angling in to attack Anakin.

Obi-Wan activated his lightsaber. The bright blue glow attracted Mol Arcasite’s attention. She reversed course and came at him, cannons blazing. Obi-Wan leaped toward the ground, bypassing the ledges he’d used to climb up. Cannon fire shattered the rock as the cruiser dived to follow him. An avalanche of rocks rained down on the body of the cruiser.

Obi-Wan landed lightly next to Anakin. “Good work, Master,” Anakin said, watching the cruiser. “More smoke coming from that left side. That cannon might overheat.”

“Good. Now for the final blow. Follow me.” Obi-Wan jumped back up the hill. Anakin followed, moving from ledge to ledge until they had reached the top. Below them, shadows cast by an overhang concealed a thick fall of snow. In the shelter of the rock, the snow had not melted with the morning sun.

“When the cruiser returns, activate your cable launcher and jump,” Obi-Wan told Anakin.

Anakin nodded, guessing his Master’s plan.

“If it doesn’t work, we’ll be hanging there, perfect targets,” Obi-Wan said. “So keep a free hand for your lightsaber.” He kept his eyes on the cruiser. “Ready—go!”

The Master and Padawan swung off the mountain on their cable launchers. The sudden move caught Mol Arcasite by surprise. The cruiser dived after them, firing rapidly.

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

The noise and heat of the blaster bolts released an avalanche of snow and chunks of ice. The large blanket fell directly on the cruiser, blinding Mol Arcasite momentarily. Obi-Wan and Anakin hung on to their cable launchers as the snow showered down past them. The cruiser wobbled crazily, heading straight for the stone side of the mountain.

At the last moment before the cruiser hit, a cargo door opened and a swoop zoomed out. They could see that Mol Arcasite was astride it.

The cruiser crashed into the mountain with a whoosh and roar of fuel. Obi-Wan and Anakin kept under the shelter of a ledge as flaming metal rained down below.

The swoop took off into the distance, became a black speck, and disappeared.

Obi-Wan and Anakin lowered themselves to the ground. Floria and Dane rushed toward them.

"That was incredible," Floria said. "You defeated Mol Arcasite! I'm not betting on Hunti Pereg anymore."

"You're rid of Mol Arcasite for good," Dane told them. "She's good, but she's known for not sticking around if her first strike fails badly. She just lost a ship. Her own survival is her first priority."

"That doesn't sound like good business for a bounty hunter," Anakin said.

"She seldom fails," Dane said. "So it doesn't matter. No doubt she has a backup plan. She'll be onto her next assignment by nightfall."

"So we've got one paralyzed bounty hunter, and another one took off," Obi-Wan said. "That leaves two."

"So what next?" Dane asked. Now he looked interested in the Jedi's strategy.

"We know that Wren didn't leave the clues for us to follow," Obi-Wan said. "The question is, who did?"

"I'm betting on Teleq," Dane said. "It's just his style. He's clever, and he's fond of traps."

## **Jude Watson**

“Whoever it is doesn’t know that we know we’re being hunted,” Obi-Wan pointed out. “As a matter of fact, he’s probably still leaving clues for us to follow.”

“So what should we do?” Floria leaned forward eagerly.

Obi-Wan noted her eagerness. Now Floria was on their side. Or else she was hoping that once the Jedi eliminated all the other bounty hunters, she and Dane would find a way to take the prize.

One way or another, it didn’t matter. He wanted to keep Floria and Dane close.

“We give him exactly what he wants. We follow them, of course,” Obi-Wan said.



## Chapter Ten

Obi-Wan and Anakin retraced their steps, climbing the mountain again. Floria and Dane trudged behind them, unused to the quick pace the Jedi set.

“I’m beginning to think I’d rather take my chances with the bounty hunters,” Floria grumbled.

Anakin stopped in order to fall into place next to her. “How did you and Dane get into this line of work?” he asked. “Where are your parents?”

“Where are yours?” Floria snapped. Suddenly her face shut down and became defensive and angry.

“My mother lives on Tatooine,” Anakin said. “She is a slave.”

Floria’s face softened slightly. “Oh. I’m sorry. Our parents are dead. I don’t come from Aaeton. That was a lie. Dane and I are from the Inner Core world of Thracior. We grew up in peaceful times, but five years ago the warlords of Thracior began to argue over territory. Raids began between the different tribes. My mother was a Hnsi, my father a Tantt. They were killed because they intermarried. The Hnsis burned our house down and killed our baby sister. Dane and I escaped.”

## Jude Watson

Floria told the story in a monotone, her eyes on the mountain trail. Ahead of them, Dane did not turn or acknowledge he was listening, but Anakin saw his neck flush red.

“Dane and I had to make our way as best we could,” Floria said. “We had lost everything, so we had to work. We found jobs in a café at a space station, washing up and serving food. Our boss was a very cruel man. We discovered he was wanted by the security forces of a nearby planet. We tricked him into getting caught. We got the reward, but we had to leave the planet. So we kind of fell into bounty hunting. We’ve been moving around the galaxy ever since.”

“When you find something you’re good at, you stick with it,” Dane said with a cocky assurance Anakin did not quite believe.

“It sounds like a hard life,” Anakin remarked.

Floria cocked an eyebrow. “And is yours so easy, Jedi?”

Anakin took the question seriously. “In a way, it is,” he said slowly. “I know I am being of service. That makes the path easy to walk.”

“Well, I’d rather go down my path in a nice, techno-maxed cruiser,” Floria said. “So I guess I’m stuck with bounty hunting.”

“Here we are,” Obi-Wan called from a short distance ahead. “We left the path here, when we thought someone was following us.”

“That was me,” Floria said.

Obi-Wan nodded. “Let’s find the next clue, Anakin.”

Anakin left Floria’s side. He pushed their conversation out of his mind. Earlier, finding clues had been fun. Now, it would be serious.

It didn’t take long to find the next clue. After a fork in the path, they found a few crumbs from a blumfruit muffin left near a flat rock alongside the trail.

“He is clever,” Obi-Wan told Anakin, squatting by the clue. “He is leading us on without tipping us off. But we know that Wren would never have left this clue.”

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Anakin briefly tasted the crumbs. He looked up at his Master, his face grave. "These are from the Temple."

"Are you sure?" Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin nodded. "I'd know Jedi Knight Alicka's muffins anywhere. This must mean that—"

"The bounty hunter definitely has Wren. He has raided his survival pack."

They hurried on. They had lost a good deal of time, and Anakin could tell that his Master was worried about Wren's fate.

They followed the path until it curved along a ridge that overlooked a meadow full of tall, slender, flowering trees. From above, the flowering branches formed a solid carpet of pink. Anakin stopped and examined a large boulder on the side of the trail. He hopped from one boulder to the next.

"This way," he called to Obi-Wan. "He went down from here to the meadow."

He looked back up at his Master. Obi-Wan's gaze swept the trees below. "Wren is near. I can feel it. Let's proceed carefully."

They made their way carefully down the slope, jumping from rock to rock. Floria and Dane followed at a distance. When they reached the meadow, the perfume of the flowering trees hit their nostrils. Under any other circumstances, Anakin would have paused to drink in the beauty of the spot. After growing up on a desert world, he was often overwhelmed by simple things such as flowers and grasses.

The trees had slender triangular trunks, but the branches were thick and wide. The flowers were so large and dense that the top of each tree was a waving mass of frothy pink.

Anakin scanned the meadow, alert for trouble. But instead, he saw Wren sleeping under a tree.

"Master—"

"I see him." Obi-Wan paused. "Something is...not right," he murmured. "I get no sense of the Force from Wren."

Anakin frowned. His Master was right.

## **Jude Watson**

Obi-Wan took a step forward. But it was not in the direction Anakin had been looking.

“Master?”

Anakin saw that his Master had headed toward Wren. But this was a different Wren, sleeping under a different tree.

And then Anakin saw another Wren, and another, and another. None of them was the real Jedi. They were merely projections of his image.

“Holograms,” Obi-Wan said.

“All of them?” Anakin asked.

He looked at his Master. There was no way to know.

## Chapter Eleven

“Stay here and don’t try anything,” Obi-Wan warned Floria and Dane. “We will handle this.”

“Be my guest,” Dane answered, his eyes darting to the many Wrens.

“Teleq wants us to run into the meadow,” Obi-Wan murmured to Anakin. “He wants us to race from one image of Wren to another. So we won’t.”

They didn’t need to. They would use the Force.

Obi-Wan and Anakin reached out and gathered it around them. A fellow Jedi was in danger. That made their connection to the Force even stronger, made their ability to gather it more urgent.

Obi-Wan felt the power of Anakin’s grasp of the Force. As always, it staggered him.

He scanned the meadow once more, and this time he knew which of the images was not an image. Which one was Wren. When he looked directly at Wren, he felt the answering surge. Anakin had also honed in on the real Wren.

The sound of Obi-Wan’s lightsaber leaving his belt was no more than a whisper. His leaving his spot was no more than a disturbance of the air. Yet he was gone, across the meadow,

## Jude Watson

racing toward Wren. He could feel rather than hear Anakin behind him.

Suddenly, Wren's body snapped into the air. Obi-Wan watched, his heart in his mouth, as Wren was hoisted up into the trees. There was no question in Obi-Wan's mind that Wren must have been given a paralyzing drug of some kind. He could tell by the boneless way Wren's legs and arms flopped as if he were a puppet.

Rage bloomed in his chest. Obi-Wan absorbed it and let it go. He did not need rage to fight this. He needed discipline. Calm.

He anticipated the attack before it came. He had known Teleq was luring them on, but he did not care. He was ready to meet the bounty hunter.

He had just not expected the attack to come from above. A shower of poisonous darts rained down from the trees.

"Flechette canisters," Obi-Wan told Anakin. He shifted his focus to the branches over his head. Now he could see Teleq. He was a long-limbed being with hooked fingers and toes, making him adept at climbing and swinging through the trees.

Perched on the branches were also flocks of birds. Their feathers were the same bright pink as the flowering trees, allowing them to blend into their surroundings. They were almost as big as Anakin, with large wings folded back against their bodies.

As Teleq moved from branch to branch, the birds began to squawk angrily. Obi-Wan leaped to catch a branch high overhead, then swung himself up into the trees. A bird pecked his hand, drawing blood. He swung up to the next branch. The tree was easy to climb, since the branches were wide and flat. He could see Teleq trying to scamper away, firing another shower of darts at him over his shoulder.

Anakin swung himself into a tree close by. He climbed up onto another branch, then another. High above the ground the

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

branches were close together, and they would be able to leap from one tree to another to pursue Teleq.

*But where was Teleq headed?* Obi-Wan wondered as he climbed. He watched Teleq jump to another tree and realized what he was doing.

Teleq was leading them closer to Wren. The closer Obi-Wan got to Teleq, the more he would bring Wren into the range of fire of the darts. And Wren would be unable to deflect them.

*What is his objective?* Obi-Wan wondered. How was he planning to catch the Jedi?

The possibilities flew through Obi-Wan's mind, presenting themselves so quickly it was as though they appeared all at once.

*Wren himself is booby-trapped.*

*There is another trap in Wren's tree.*

*There is a trap on the logical progression to Wren's tree.*

*There is no trap. Teleq is planning a surprise move with the flechette canister or another weapon.*

*The question is, how can I surprise him instead?*

Anakin leaped from his tree to the next one, deflecting a shower of darts with a series of quick lightsaber moves. Obi-Wan leaped to another tree, still considering his options. Suddenly his mind cleared, leaving a space without sound. He knew what would follow: Qui-Gon's voice. Often, it arose in his mind just when he was most confused or uncertain.

*Use everything you have. Use the ground. Use the sky. Use what is around you.*

Another bird suddenly squawked by his ear. Obi-Wan deftly moved to the left as the bird struck out with a long, pointed beak. Another bird leaped closer on the thick branch, screeching at Obi-Wan. He realized that he had almost stumbled into a nest. No wonder the birds were so furious. He quickly jumped to the branch of the next tree.

He didn't like the setting of this battle. Teleq was adept at navigating the trees. He had chosen his ground wisely. And Obi-Wan couldn't help the nagging suspicion that somehow Teleq

## Jude Watson

was luring them into a trap. They would have to get him first. But how?

Another bird squawked overhead, its mate joining it to circle above a nest.

*Use everything you have...*

While he deflected more darts from the flechette canister, Obi-Wan searched the branches near Wren's tree. Obviously, Teleq was trying to drive them there. He was being clever about it—he was trying to make them think that he was attempting to keep them away from the tree—but Obi-Wan knew better.

There—he saw it. A large nest near Teleq, guarded by two birds. That would do.

He did not have time to communicate his plan to Anakin. He would have to trust that his Padawan would get the idea.

Obi-Wan jumped from his tree to the next, and the next, following the route he felt sure Teleq wanted him to follow. He kept his lightsaber activated, swinging at the darts to clear his way. He could hear Anakin behind him, jumping from tree to tree.

When they were closer to Teleq, Obi-Wan swung off to another tree to his right. Anakin hesitated, then moved in the opposite direction.

It was not the first time that Obi-Wan was grateful for his Padawan's excellent instincts. Time and again, Anakin would read Obi-Wan's strategy faster than Obi-Wan ever expected.

Moving fast now, the two Jedi leaped from tree branch to tree branch. Obi-Wan could not see Teleq's face, but he could tell by his movements and the frantic bursts from the flechette canister that the bounty hunter was unnerved.

As Obi-Wan grew closer, Anakin swung out to the side, so that Teleq was forced to move back, exactly where Obi-Wan wanted him.

Obi-Wan gathered the Force. It would be a difficult leap, bypassing one tree to land on another. But it was the only way to surprise Teleq enough to get him to leap to the next tree.



## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Obi-Wan jumped. The speed and power of the move surprised Teleq. Obi-Wan saw the shock on his face as he stumbled on the wide branch, then awkwardly leaped to the next tree. At the same time, Obi-Wan changed direction in midair. He collided with Teleq, sending the bounty hunter sailing straight into a bird's nest.

*Screeee! Screeeee! Screeee! Screeee!* The birds erupted in wild, furious calls. Two small baby birds lifted their heads and tried to flap their wings at the intruder.

The two large birds guarding the nest suddenly rose in the air. Together, they extended their powerful claws and snatched Teleq from the nest. Beating their wings, they carried a struggling Teleq away.

Anakin leaped onto the branch next to Obi-Wan. "Good plan, Master."

"We need to get Wren down from that tree. It can't be as easy as it looks." Obi-Wan leaped from branch to branch. When he got onto the tree next to Wren's, he examined the area carefully. Wren could not move his eyes, yet Obi-Wan felt the Force roll out from him in strong waves. Wren was warning him.

"I know, Wren," he called to him. "We will take our time, but we'll get you out."

The ground at the bottom of the tree was thickly carpeted with blooms, just like every other tree. But here the blooms were massed a little too thickly. The pattern was not random enough.

"Anakin, swing down and examine the ground under the tree," Obi-Wan instructed. "But be careful. Don't get too close."

Anakin eased down to the ground. He circled the tree, gazing carefully down. "These blossoms have been placed here."

"That's what I thought."

"Something is underneath." Before Obi-Wan could stop him, Anakin tossed a rock into the mass of flowers. It disappeared.

"There's a trench down there," Anakin called up.

## Jude Watson

"You're lucky there wasn't an explosive," Obi-Wan said disapprovingly. Sometimes Anakin acted too rashly. If he could teach the boy one thing, it would be to wait.

He began to study the tree branches. He noticed seams running through several of the branches.

"I think I get it," he called down to Anakin. "These branches have been cut through, then resealed. They won't take our weight. We would have crashed through, right into that trench."

"And then he could have hit us with some paralyzing darts," Anakin finished. "Pretty simple plan."

"Simple is sometimes best," Obi-Wan said. "Lucky for us, it was not in this case. We'll have to use our cable launchers to get Wren."

Activating their launchers, the Jedi swung close to Wren and managed to cut him free. Obi-Wan supported him as he released his cable launcher and they dropped to the ground.

He carefully lay Wren down and examined him. There was a long gash on one leg and his arm looked bruised. He had a blaster wound to the shoulder. He must have been in pain.

Obi-Wan reached for the bacta in his kit and administered it.

"You will be fine, but you need better care than we can give you here," he told Wren. "We must get you back to the Temple."

"That means we need a ship," Anakin said.

"Teleq's must be nearby," Obi-Wan said, rising to his feet.

Anakin looked around. "Where are Floria and Dane? They were supposed to wait by the hill."

"I think I know where I can find them, too," Obi-Wan said.

## Chapter Twelve

Floria and Dane sat by Teleq's ship at the end of the meadow. They jumped up when they saw Obi-Wan and Anakin.

"We saw the battle," Floria said. "I'll never underestimate the Jedi again. The way you strategized! The way you moved!"

"Nice star cruiser," Anakin said, circling around Teleq's ship. "We could get to Coruscant on this."

"Don't bother going inside yet," Obi-Wan said. "The engine's been disabled."

Anakin poked his head around the side of the ship and looked at Obi-Wan quizzically. Obi-Wan looked at Floria and Dane.

"Well?" he said sternly.

Dane opened his hand. A sensor lay in it. "Just a little part," he said. "And the engine is easily fixed. It's an activation sensor for the sublight drive."

"So Teleq wouldn't be able to leave the atmosphere," Anakin said. "He'd have to rely on repulsorlift engines."

"And a warning light would tell him so," Obi-Wan finished. "He'd know he wouldn't be able to take off without work on the engine. And while he was working on it, you'd disable *him*. And take off with us for the prize."

Floria tried to smile. "Hey, it was worth a try."

## Jude Watson

“Wait a second,” Anakin said. “This means that you expected Teleq to capture us!”

“No offense,” Dane said. “What kind of bounty hunters would we be if we didn’t explore all the alternatives?”

Glaring at Dane, Anakin strode forward and snatched the part from his hand. “Don’t worry, Master. I can fix the engine in no time at all.”

Anakin accessed the engine panel on the exterior of the ship. He withdrew a small hydrospanner from his utility kit and his head disappeared inside. Muffled exclamations floated out to the others.

Finally Anakin emerged, his face streaked with grease. “You shorted out the sublight engine fuses and deactivated the power converter! I can’t fix this!”

“I did?” Dane looked surprised. “I didn’t mean to. I don’t know that much about engines,” he confided to Obi-Wan.

Floria smacked her brother on the arm. “I told you to be careful! Now how are we supposed to get out of here?”

“You’re the one who told me to disable it!” Dane protested.

“You said it was a good idea! If I’d known you didn’t know how, I wouldn’t have suggested it!”

Obi-Wan heaved an exasperated breath. If he could leave these two behind, he would. But something told him that he still needed them. “Stop squabbling, you two. We have to take Wren back to the Temple. We’ll have to return and find the other bounty hunter’s ship.”

“Go back down the mountain?” Floria asked in dismay. “I’m exhausted!”

“And dusk will be here soon,” Dane added.

Obi-Wan shouldered his pack. “Then we’d better get started.”

They left Wren wrapped in a blanket inside Teleq’s ship. Anakin was able to reconfigure the ship’s security code so that

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Wren would be protected inside. Even if Teleq somehow managed to get free of those birds, he would not be able to board his ship. At least Wren would have warmth and shelter. Promising to return soon, they set off down the mountain again.

"It's been almost five hours," Obi-Wan told Anakin. "With luck, the bounty hunter will be just getting over his paralysis. He'll have no choice but to cooperate."

"We certainly are developing a collection of bounty hunters," Anakin remarked.

"Unfortunately they're not all as harmless as Floria and Dane," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin looked at him curiously. "You knew Floria wasn't telling the truth from the beginning, didn't you?"

"I suspected as much," Obi-Wan admitted. "But I had no way of knowing what she was concealing."

"I believed her story," Anakin said, frowning. "Why didn't the Force warn me?"

Obi-Wan smiled. "The Force is not a truth serum, Padawan. The ability to read a being's true motives comes with experience and patience. I was once very bad at it. Qui-Gon taught me how to look and listen. Floria betrayed herself by playing on our sympathies just a bit too much."

"And you knew they would find Teleq's ship and try to disable it."

"Experience," Obi-Wan said. "It tells me that beings follow their best interests. Floria and Dane have had to fight their way through the galaxy. They are used to looking out for themselves. Naturally they would still try to foil another bounty hunter winning the prize."

Obi-Wan put a hand on Anakin's shoulder. "Do not trouble yourself, Padawan. You have an open heart. This is a good thing. With time you will learn the balance you need in a galaxy where all beings do not tell the truth. Your impulsiveness is a source of energy and power for you. But it can lead to trouble. You will

## **Jude Watson**

learn to be more careful. Sometimes it is better to walk than run.”

“I got us into trouble with the malia, and then in the cavern,” Anakin admitted. “I am sorry, Master.”

“Danger finds us on every mission,” Obi-Wan said. “Let us look forward.”

They followed the winding path down the mountain once again. When they reached the site of their battle with the Tursha, they hurried through the meadow. Ahead they could see the camouflaged tent. As they walked forward, they could distinguish the Tursha still slumped against the tree.

“He’s still paralyzed,” Anakin said, starting forward.

Obi-Wan stopped him. “No, Padawan. He is dead.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Obi-Wan crouched over the body. "Poisoned," he said.

Anakin leaned forward curiously. "Flechette canister?"

"No. See the flecks on his lips? It was a fast poison, injected in the neck." Obi-Wan gently moved the Tursha's head. "Here." Obi-Wan stood. "Do you have your tarp?"

Anakin withdrew the tarp from his survival pack. Gently, Obi-Wan wrapped the body. "We will come back for him," he murmured. "We must take him to Coruscant. He might have had family." He stood, his eyes roaming the area. "Now we must return to our problem. We must find his ship."

They split up and searched the area thoroughly, but they could not find the ship the bounty hunter had used.

"One of the other bounty hunters must have stolen it," Obi-Wan said. "Mol Arcasite, perhaps."

"Do you think she killed him?"

"Possibly," Obi-Wan said. "But one of the others could have done it. We have no way to know."

"What now?" Anakin wondered. "We're stuck on the planet with no comm unit."

"We have one last sabaac card to play," Obi-Wan said. He turned to Floria and Dane.

## Jude Watson

“What?” Floria shifted nervously. “We told you everything we know.”

“I don’t think so,” Obi-Wan answered. “If you had captured us, where would you have taken us?”

“To Granta Omega, of course,” Dane answered.

“How would you have contacted him?” Obi-Wan asked. “You must have some sort of prearranged line of communication.”

Floria and Dane gave each other a nervous look.

“Because you’re going to use it. You’re going to contact him and tell him that you’ve captured us,” Obi-Wan said. “And you’re going to ask him to meet you on Ragoon-6.”

“What if we do?” Floria asked. “Do you think we’re crazy enough to contact Granta Omega and lie to him?”

Obi-Wan merely looked at them. It was enough.

“All right, all right,” Floria muttered. “We’ll contact Granta Omega and lie to him. Just arrange a really nice funeral for us, will you?”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “No funerals. But the game is over. We’re not chasing any more bounty hunters. Granta Omega will come to us.”

Floria agreed grudgingly. “I guess we’ll cooperate. I’m tired of trying to outthink you, anyway. Obviously, we’re outmatched. Besides, I’m starting to like you. And I bet Dane is, too.”

Dane groaned. “Guilty. Some bounty hunters we are. We befriend our prey instead of betraying them. Okay.” He gazed seriously at Obi-Wan. “If we do this, will you protect us?”

Obi-Wan nodded. “You have my word.”

Slowly, Dane withdrew a comlink from a hidden pocket in his cloak. “It’s only got one channel,” he said. “It’s a direct line to Omega.” Dane activated it and inputted a code.

“We have the Jedi,” he said. “But we lost our transport. You must come to us.”

He listened for a moment, then shut off the comlink. “He’s agreed to meet us. He sounded surprised that Floria and I were



## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

the ones to catch you. Kind of insulting, actually. But he's coming." Dane looked at his sister. "Unfortunately, he wants to meet us on top of the mountain."

Floria groaned. "Not again."

"Don't worry," Obi-Wan said. "We'll get up a faster way."

This time, they did not follow the trail. They used cable launchers to vault straight up the cliffs. From that spot, they were able to hike above the tree line. The air was thin and cold here, and Obi-Wan and Anakin paused to don their thermal capes. The snow was ankle-deep on the trail.

"There's a good chance he'll be wary," Obi-Wan told Anakin. "We must pretend to be Dane and Floria's prisoners until the last possible moment. I don't have to tell you that we need to take Granta Omega alive. Perhaps more important than catching him will be finding out why and how he targeted us."

Floria and Dane slipped laser cuffs over Anakin and Obi-Wan's wrists but did not seal them. It would appear that the two were prisoners. They marched ahead of Floria and Dane.

"Wasn't it your idea to become bounty hunters?" Floria grumbled to her brother as she pushed her way through the snow. "Floria, we can see the galaxy. Floria, it will be fun. Floria, it's an easy way to make a fortune—"

"Floria, you're driving me crazy," Dane interrupted.

"We're getting closer, you two," Obi-Wan warned from behind them. "Try to act like professionals. We could be under surveillance."

"Master, there is someone ahead," Anakin said under his breath.

A humanoid male sat on top of ice-encrusted snow ahead. He was dressed all in white, and had blended in with the snow.

"It must be Hunti Pereg," Dane murmured to them. "He's the only bounty hunter left."

The stranger did not move as they approached.

"Greetings," Dane called. "We are Dane and Floria, bounty hunters. We have caught the Jedi."

## Jude Watson

The man smiled pleasantly. "I can see that. Congratulations. I am Hunti Pereg. Bounty hunter as well."

Obi-Wan was poised for an assault. Surely the fearsome Hunti Pereg would not let two children take away his prize. His face looked fierce and frightening. It had the patched-together look of a recent application of synth-flesh, as though he had been badly injured.

*The scars of the life of a bounty hunter*, Obi-Wan thought. It bothered him to think of young Floria and Dane continuing with such a life. Despite their grumbles and their tricks, they were not bad creatures.

*And they are exactly the sort of beings Qui-Gon would befriend. And I would not understand why. Now I do, Qui-Gon. Now, I do.*

"Don't worry, kids," Pereg told them. "I won't interfere with your prize."

"I'm glad to see you abide by the rules of honor," Dane said.

"It's not that," Pereg said. "I can't move my legs. That scoundrel son of a gravel-maggot Teleq shot me with a paralyzing dart four hours ago. So it looks like you've won."

"Is there anything we can do for you?" Floria asked politely. "It's awfully cold up here."

"Very kind of you to ask," Pereg said. "After you collect the reward, if you wouldn't mind sending a ship back for me, I'd appreciate it. Professional courtesy. I'll make it worth your while."

"Have you seen Granta Omega, by any chance?" Floria asked him.

He shook his head. "Sorry. It's just been me and the mountain."

They left Hunti Pereg behind and continued to the rendezvous point. They were almost at the top of the mountain now. The sun had slid behind the peak, and the wind had picked up. A few snowflakes drifted down from a white sky. Floria wrapped her cloak tighter around her.

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

They stopped at the coordinates Granta had given them. They looked up at the sky, waiting to see a ship. Dane got out a tarp with thermal coils and spread it on the ground. He and Floria sat, trying to keep warm. Obi-Wan and Anakin stood, holding their arms so the laser cuffs were visible. Obi-Wan did not feel the cold.

The minutes ticked by.

“He isn’t coming,” Obi-Wan said at last.

“Do you think he knows it was a trick?” Anakin asked.

“There’s no way to know,” Obi-Wan said. “But a storm is coming, and we need to find help for Wren. We’ll have to track Omega after we get Wren to safety.”

“How?” Anakin asked. “We don’t have a ship.”

“We’ll have to take another look at Teleq’s,” Obi-Wan decided.

Floria stood. “At last I can get off this mountain.”

“Well, at least all the bounty hunters have been accounted for,” Anakin said. “We don’t have to worry about being attacked.”

They started back down the trail, their footsteps crunching through the thin skin of ice into the densely packed snow.

Obi-Wan heard a slight whistling noise behind him. A small metal ball whizzed by his ear and caught the light as it arced through the air.

“Hit the ground!” Obi-Wan shouted as he vaulted forward and pulled Floria and Dane down underneath him.

## Chapter Fourteen

The explosion sent a shower of snow high into the air. Obi-Wan lifted his head. The thermal detonator had hit thirty meters away. That was close. Detonators had a twenty-meter radius of destruction.

Three Attack Droids headed toward them, gliding just above the surface of the snow with repulsorlift engines.

There was no cover. They could not avoid this battle, even if they'd wanted to. They would have to protect Floria and Dane and foil their attacker. He or she was fighting wisely, attacking without advancing.

At this point, Obi-Wan was getting a little tired of bounty hunters.

Obi-Wan put his hand on Dane's back. "Stay down," he ordered him swiftly. "We will take care of this."

Dane nodded and covered Floria protectively with his own body.

Anakin's lightsaber blazed in his hand. Obi-Wan nodded and they raced toward the advancing droids, swinging their lightsabers to deflect the blaster bolts. They had to be careful. A stray bolt could hit Dane, who was out in the open.

Anakin leaped toward the first droid. He cut it down with one stroke. Blaster bolts melted the snow around him, but

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Anakin was already twisting in midair to get out of the way. He landed lightly in precisely the right spot to launch another attack.

He had factored in the icy skin on top of the snow, but his foot still slipped slightly. Anakin took a moment to get his balance. He had forgotten about the thermal detonators. Obi-Wan saw the two balls whizzing toward Anakin. There was no time for him to reach the spot. He reached down and scooped up two large rocks. He threw one with each hand. Each rock flew unerringly toward its target, hitting the thermal detonators in midair, causing them to veer off course. They sailed by on either side of Anakin's head and fell twenty-five meters away. Too close.

Obi-Wan charged forward. The remaining two droids were trying to outflank the Jedi. He fanned out and Anakin did the same. Then they ran toward each other, each targeting a droid as they jumped, their lightsabers held high. The droids fell with a sizzle in two smoking piles into the snow.

Obi-Wan could see the attacker now. It was another bounty hunter. He was tall and lean and dressed in plastoid armor. Two harnesses were slung crosswise around his body, filled with a variety of weapons. Attached to his belt were more thermal detonators.

He flipped one toward the Jedi. Obi-Wan and Anakin could not deflect it with their lightsabers. They would not be able to get close enough. They had exactly six seconds to move out of the way.

Obi-Wan reached for the cable line on his belt. He lassoeed the detonator and jerked the line, sending it in the opposite direction, back toward the attacker. He saw the attacker bare his teeth in an admiring smile at the Jedi's skill even as he reached up to catch it in his bare hand. Then he flung it backward, where it detonated harmlessly.

The attacker did not have to move. His weapons could be launched from a distance. But Obi-Wan and Anakin had to maneuver through deep snow to get to him. Anakin had his cable

## Jude Watson

line out and was ready to lasso the next detonator. Obi-Wan ran through the snow. The wind had formed deep drifts, and he had to use the Force to guide him. He used his lightsaber to melt the snow when it piled up against him.

The detonators flew toward them furiously. Occasionally they could hit one with a rock, or lasso one with a cable line. But mostly the two Jedi had to outrun them.

Obi-Wan's legs were beginning to tire from struggling against the snow. He could hear the rasp of Anakin's breath. How long could they keep this up? Obi-Wan wondered.

Beside the attacker, Obi-Wan saw steam rising from the snow. He caught a glint of water and realized it was a thermal spring.

"Anakin, head right," he called to his Padawan.

They moved slightly to the attacker's right. Every time they moved, they brought him closer to the spring.

Ten detonators left on his belt. Obi-Wan took a chance and leaped, ducking to avoid a detonator headed his way. It exploded, and he felt the shock waves against his skin. He landed on the snow awkwardly and slid down the slope toward his attacker.

Anakin leaped in order to land in front of him, blocking his descent. Two detonators headed their way, and Obi-Wan lassoed one and sent it crashing into the other. The two smoking orbs fell into deep snow.

"The thermal pool," he said to Anakin. "Drive him toward it."

Anakin nodded. He looked tired. Obi-Wan was, too. Yet he knew that beyond their fatigue lay their stamina.

When they were close enough, Obi-Wan risked a leap straight at the attacker. He knew he would cause him to back up, and the attacker did. He slid on the ice and fell back, crashing into the spring.

The attacker slipped beneath the surface of the water, then emerged, treading water. He shook the hair out of his eyes and gazed at Obi-Wan with a hostile look.

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Obi-Wan stood at the edge. He held out a hand. "You have about ten seconds."

"Yes."

The attacker knew the extreme heat would cause a fusion reaction. The thermal detonators would blow.

His eyes were a vivid color somewhere between silver and lilac. There was a scar on his upper lip. His hair was long and tied back with a silver cord.

"Come on," Obi-Wan said, keeping his hand steady. "We won't hurt you."

"Not you, but another," the bounty hunter said. "If I return to him without you, he will kill me anyway. I will have an easier death this way. You don't know his power. It comes from the pyramid itself."

"You don't have to return to him," Obi-Wan said.

"Ah. But he will find me." The bounty hunter closed his eyes.

Obi-Wan reached out over the water. "You must give up!"

"I cannot," the bounty hunter replied, his eyes still closed. "And I must tell you this—neither will he."

Obi-Wan leaped into the pool. But it was too late. The thermal detonators exploded. Water rose and hit Obi-Wan in the face. He choked and slipped beneath the water, then surfaced, struggling against the waves created by the explosion. Smoke rolled toward him.

The smoke cleared. Deep below the clear surface of the water, he saw the bounty hunter's body spiral down, down, to a bottomless pool beneath.

## Chapter Fifteen

Anakin hurried over to the thermal pool. His Master had hauled himself out and stood at the edge. The steaming water pooled at his feet, melting the snow.

Through the smoke and steam, he could see the sadness on his Master's face. The Force was strong here. His Master was reaching out to it and gathering it around, as though warming himself. Obi-Wan's gaze was far away.

"Master? Are you all right?"

"I am saying good-bye to a being I did not know," Obi-Wan said softly.

The reverence in his tone surprised Anakin. "He could have killed you."

"Yet he did not. There is always a need for grief when a being dies, Padawan. Qui-Gon taught me that." Obi-Wan looked down into the steaming pool. "I saw someone take his own life in a pool like this one. It was Xanatos, Qui-Gon's greatest enemy. A being who hated Qui-Gon and who would stop at nothing to destroy him. Still, when he took his own life, Qui-Gon stopped to mourn his life's passing. I will never forget it."

Anakin nodded, though he did not understand. His greatest enemy so far in his life had been a slave trafficker named Krayn. When he had died, Anakin had not paused to mourn. Far from it.



## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

He had rejoiced in his death. It could only be good for the galaxy that such a terrible being had ceased to exist.

*Something to meditate on in my next session, he thought. I'll add it to the list.* The difference between Anakin's thoughts and Obi-Wan's lessons was sometimes more than he wanted to examine. It was a struggle to reconcile them.

"Why do you think the bounty hunter did that?" he asked.

"That is the crucial question," Obi-Wan said. "He preferred to end his life rather than meet his fate with Granta Omega. That should tell us something."

"It tells us that Omega is very powerful," Anakin said. "And very cruel."

"Yes, but there is more," Obi-Wan said, as though to himself.

Anakin wanted to stamp his foot in frustration. *What? What are you thinking?* But Obi-Wan did not add to his statement. He just looked wise and thoughtful, as usual.

"There must have been six bounty hunters, then," Anakin said. He counted them off on his fingers. "The bounty hunter with the Stokhli stick. Floria and Dane together. Mol Arcasite. Teleq. Hunti Pereg. And now this one. That makes six. Floria and Dane were wrong."

"Perhaps," Obi-Wan said in the same thoughtful tone.

Annoyed, Anakin spun on his heel and trudged off to find Floria and Dane. They had gone off the trail and had hiked up a small rise, where a space cruiser was nestled in a small hollow.

"We have a way to get off-planet," Floria said excitedly. "This must be his ship."

Anakin nodded. "Who was he? Do you know?"

Dane shook his head. "We were positive there were only four other bounty hunters. It was important for all of us to know exactly how many bounty hunters were involved. We all insisted on that. If Granta Omega had lied to us, we wouldn't have been happy. Even Omega wouldn't want beings like Hunti Pereg and Mol Arcasite as enemies."

## Jude Watson

Obi-Wan walked up. "It's time to leave Ragoon-6."

"The best words I ever heard," Floria said with a shiver. Night was falling. Blue shadows smudged the snow.

Anakin swung himself aboard the cruiser. He searched the cockpit, then motioned to Obi-Wan.

"Master, I found something strange. This cruiser belongs to—"

"Hunti Pereg," Obi-Wan finished.

"Yes," Anakin said. "But why is it up here, at the peak? Why isn't it the last bounty hunter's ship?"

"It is the last one's ship," Obi-Wan said. "That bounty hunter was Hunti Pereg. I am sure of it."

Anakin looked at him, puzzled. "Then who was the bounty hunter with the paralyzed legs?"

"It was not a bounty hunter. It was Granta Omega," Obi-Wan said softly.

Anakin was stunned. "How do you know?"

"Floria and Dane never met him, so they would not recognize him," Obi-Wan said. "Even so, he was in disguise. That synth-flesh I took for repair of an injury was designed to conceal his face. I realize that now. He does not want us to know what he looks like because he plans to meet us again."

"So he wasn't really paralyzed," Anakin said.

"No," Obi-Wan said. "That was also a ruse. He somehow knew that Floria and Dane had lied to him. He knew they were trying to trap him. So he came down to see for himself. He needed to be sure. When he saw us, he was."

"But how would he know? We were wearing laser cuffs."

"Young Padawan, if I can teach you one thing, it is this: Never underestimate an enemy. Or a friend. Now tell me. What did you think of the man you saw?"

Anakin thought back to the amiable bounty hunter with the paralyzed legs. "Not much," he said. "I mean, I didn't get much of a feeling from him one way or another. I got no sense of the dark side. Or the living Force, either, for that matter."

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

“Exactly,” Obi-Wan said. “I have been thinking the same. There are beings that Jedi call voids. At first sight they seem to give off no real energy, rather like a hologram. But only beings with great power can project a simple blank to a Jedi. Sometimes a void can be much more dangerous than a being who pulses with the dark side of the Force. They are clever and focused enough to hide their dark side, and hide it so well they can even hide it from Jedi for a time.”

“I didn’t think Jedi could be tricked that way,” Anakin said.

“Jedi can be tricked, my young Padawan,” Obi-Wan said. “They can be wrong. They can make mistakes. Do not forget that. We try to minimize those things by following our feelings and connecting to the Force. Yet we are not infallible. Now, we must return to pick up Wren. Night is coming.”

Obi-Wan beckoned to Floria and Dane, and the two started up the landing ramp. “Do you remember any details of Hunti Pereg?” Obi-Wan asked them. “What he looked like, or what he was wearing?”

“He was wearing white,” Floria said. “I remember that. And he was tall.”

“He wasn’t very tall,” Dane said. “But his face was very strange.”

“Strange in what way?” Obi-Wan asked.

Dane frowned. “I can’t remember.”

“He had dark hair,” Floria said.

“No, he had no hair at all,” Dane said impatiently.

Brother and sister moved to sit down, still arguing. Anakin fired the engines, and the cruiser rose from the spot. He used the repulsorlift engines for planetary travel and cruised down the mountain.

He knew his Master was troubled. He could sense it. He was tired of comparing his Master–Padawan relationship with Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon’s. He would always come up short. But was it fair for him to be angry at Obi-Wan because of that?

## **Jude Watson**

Ahead lay the snowy plain where they had first seen Granta Omega. No one was there.

“How could he have gone?” Dane asked, peering out the viewscreen. “The paralyzing dart couldn’t have worn off so quickly.”

Obi-Wan and Anakin did not answer. It was better that Dane and Floria still think that the man had been Hunti Pereg. Anakin slowed his speed and cruised over the plain. Within moments, he found what he was looking for. Below they could see evidence that a small cruiser had landed. Melted snow and scorch marks showed where the craft had taken off.

“Please land here for a moment, Padawan,” Obi-Wan said. “I would like to examine the area.”

Anakin set the craft down on the snow. He activated the landing ramp and Obi-Wan hurried down it.

Anakin stayed in the pilot’s seat, watching Obi-Wan explore the landing site. Once again, he had been left behind.

## Chapter Sixteen

Obi-Wan was disturbed. He felt queasy, almost dizzy. He searched through the snow, but he didn't know what he was looking for.

*You don't know his power. It comes from the pyramid itself.*

Obi-Wan had felt cold ever since hearing those words. The pyramid was a shape revered by the Sith.

The queasy feeling grew stronger. He remembered it well. He had felt it in the presence of the Sith Holocron. On that mission he had been disturbed by the Holocron's power. He had worried about Anakin's reaction to it. He did not want his Padawan to know what he suspected.

As if guided by his own unease, Obi-Wan reached down through the snow and put his hand on a small object. He pulled it out of the snow. It was a small black case.

He examined it, swallowing against the nausea that rose in his throat. There was no opening he could see, no seams. It simply appeared to be a cube.

He unsheathed his lightsaber and carefully cut a small seam in the cube. The case broke open. A small pyramid was nestled in black shimmersilk. It blazed to life, and he saw it was a holoprojector.

## Jude Watson

Unspeakable scenes flashed out at him, so quickly he could not absorb them. Murder. Suffering. Destruction.

Obi-Wan shut the case. He wiped the sweat on his brow. No, his Padawan must not see this.

“Master?”

Anakin had left the ship. He stood uncertainly a few meters away. “Did you find something?”

“It’s nothing.” Obi-Wan tucked the case inside his cloak. “We can take it back to the Temple for examination. Come, Padawan.”

But Anakin did not move. “I need to know what you found. Don’t you think I can feel it, too?”

He saw the sweat on Anakin’s forehead, saw the slight tremor in his knees.

He could dismiss him. He could say, *You do not need to know.*

Would Qui-Gon have told him? Perhaps not. His Master revealed things in their own time.

Anakin met his gaze boldly. He would not back down. Obi-Wan saw that clearly. He would not allow the moment to pass. He would grab on to it, extend it, bend it to his will. He would do anything to obtain what he wanted.

*He is so different from me,* Obi-Wan thought again, bemused.

*If he is so different from you, why do you treat him as though he is a younger version of you? Why do you act as you think Qui-Gon would have acted with you as his Padawan?*

The question startled him. What was especially surprising was that he did not hear Qui-Gon’s voice asking it. He heard his own.

Maybe it was time he stopped trying to be the Master Qui-Gon was. It was time to claim the role for himself.

“It is a Sith artifact,” he told Anakin.

His Padawan swallowed. “I thought so.”

“The bounty hunter mentioned a pyramid before he died. He said that Granta Omega drew his power from it. If the Sith are involved, or a Sith cult, that would explain much. The

## **STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi**

ruthlessness and cunning of the attack. The use of bounty hunters. The specific targeting of Jedi.”

“Do you think Granta Omega is a Sith?”

“No,” Obi-Wan said. “If he were, we would have known it. I think he is an ordinary being with a gift for concealment on a very deep level. He could have dealings with a Sith, or with a Sith cult. But he himself is not a Dark Lord. I think he wanted us to find this case. He wants us to know exactly how dangerous he is, and how far he is willing to go.”

Obi-Wan gazed down the mountain and took in the lowering sky. Clouds rumbled, and snow suddenly began to fall, thick and fast.

“We have a new enemy, Padawan.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Anakin put his hand on his lightsaber hilt. "I am ready, Master."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow at him. "Ready for what?"

"To go after Granta Omega." Anakin swallowed against the acid in his throat. The power of the Sith case was fading. He could face whatever Granta Omega would throw at them.

"We're not going after Omega," Obi-Wan said. "He's long gone. We'd never be able to track him through the galaxy."

"Never? One should not use absolute statements," Anakin said. One corner of his mouth twitched, a sure sign he was trying not to grin.

"It would be extremely difficult, then," Obi-Wan amended with a small smile. "And we have a wounded Jedi to see to. Have you forgotten that, Padawan?"

"We could drop Wren at the Temple and retrace our steps," Anakin said. "We can't just let Omega go!"

"That's exactly what we can do," Obi-Wan said firmly. "Do not chase trouble, Padawan. There are not many guarantees in the galaxy, but I guarantee you this: Trouble will find you."

Anakin pressed his lips together. He did not agree with his Master's decision. They had stumbled on a powerful evil. Was it



## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

right to let it slip through their fingers? It wasn't like Obi-Wan to turn away from danger.

*Unless he fears I cannot handle it.*

Another doubt. They were crowding his mind on this planet. Was this the true purpose of the training exercise?

Obi-Wan knew how unnerved Anakin had been during their encounter with the Holocron. Perhaps he was afraid that Anakin would not be able to fulfill another mission dealing with the Sith or Sith followers so soon. He had almost not told Anakin what he had found. Anakin had seen that. Even though they had not encountered a Sith since the mission to Naboo, Anakin had been rocked by the dark evil of the Sith just being near the order's artifacts.

*He is always trying to protect me. He does not trust me. What is the good of this exercise if Obi-Wan still doesn't have faith in me?*

The thoughts crashed against his skull. Anakin tried to quiet them, to find the clarity of peace that Obi-Wan seemed to carry with him so easily, like a tool on his utility belt.

Obi-Wan slid the case into his cloak. "We will bring this back to the Temple and deposit it with the Sith Holocron. That will keep it safe. Now, let us return to Coruscant."

Wren was weakened but already beginning to recover when they returned to him. He was able to walk to the cruiser. They settled him inside, and Obi-Wan administered more bacta.

"We'll be in Coruscant by morning," he told him.

Wren gave him a wan smile. "I will be glad to see the Temple. This exercise did not go as I expected."

"Yes, you must be surprised," Anakin agreed with a straight face. "After all, I found you on the first day, just as I promised."

"I hardly think it counts," Wren said, drawing the blanket around his shoulders huffily.

"I don't see why not," Anakin said, flashing Obi-Wan a quick grin.

## Jude Watson

Obi-Wan grinned back. "I think we should let Wren rest. Maybe you should concentrate on piloting the ship."

They picked up the body of the Tursha and shot out of the sparkling green-blue atmosphere of Ragoon. The trip to Coruscant went quickly. Anakin admired the bounty hunter's sleek, fast ship.

"These sublight engines are tweaked," he said as he eased into a shipping lane on Coruscant at dawn. "Any chance we can confiscate this ship for the Temple?" He gave a quick glance at Obi-Wan. "Okay, okay. I know. We have to turn it in to the Senate."

"We have to turn in Floria and Dane, too," Obi-Wan said softly.

"*What?*" Floria had come up behind them. Her mouth was open, and her cheeks flushed pink.

"You broke any number of galactic laws," Obi-Wan said. "You tried to kidnap two Jedi. You sabotaged a cruiser. You—"

"But we helped you!" Floria protested.

"You didn't have much choice," Obi-Wan pointed out. "Don't worry, I'm sure the security authorities won't detain you for very long. They will try to place you with a family for rehabilitation."

Dane jackknifed to his feet. "Rehabilitation? Into what?"

"You will have a normal life," Obi-Wan said. "A roof over your head, schooling, a chance for a profession—"

"We are past wanting any of that," Dane said. "We have been on our own too long."

"What about your sister?" Obi-Wan asked. "Are you so sure it would not be better for her?"

Dane hesitated.

"Hey, I'm standing right here," Floria said. "And I want what Dane wants. He knows what's best. Not you."

"I'm afraid you have no choice in the matter," Obi-Wan said firmly.

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

They paused long enough to leave Wren at the Temple. They had called ahead so that a med team was waiting to remove him from the craft. Another Jedi came and carefully took the Sith case from Obi-Wan.

“Please inform Yoda that I will report to him shortly,” Obi-Wan told him.

Obi-Wan directed Anakin to pilot the ship straight to security headquarters. There, they left Floria and Dane in the hands of a young security officer and left the body of the Tursha along with the scant information they had about him.

Floria leaned closer to the officer. “I’m glad to leave this life behind,” she confided, her blue eyes very wide. “My brother and I regret the life we’ve led. We want to start over. Our dead parents would want it that way.” Her eyes filled with tears.

Anakin rolled his eyes as the security officer led them off.

“This time, I can tell when Floria is lying,” he said. “I think I’ve learned my lesson about pretty young girls with wounded eyes.”

Obi-Wan smiled. “Floria and Dane will talk themselves out of detention, I am sure.”

“So they will be on the loose again.” Anakin shook his head. “They are too young for that life. Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“No, Padawan. It is not our mission to save them. Beings take their own paths, and sadly there is little one can do to change that.” Obi-Wan stood. “Come, let’s leave the cruiser here for a moment. I want to see a friend nearby.”

As they walked, Anakin marveled at Obi-Wan’s detachment. He felt vaguely unsatisfied from the mission-that-wasn’t-a-mission. They hadn’t found the mastermind behind the attack on them. A Jedi was wounded and had almost been killed.

And as for the training exercise, in Anakin’s mind it had been a complete failure. It had not strengthened the bonds of trust between them. It had done just the opposite. It had brought

## Jude Watson

up questions Anakin did not want to ponder. It had made him question the bond itself.

Obi-Wan indicated a café ahead. "This used to be Didi's Café."

"I remember Didi and Astri," Anakin said. "Did something happen to them?"

"Astri married a homesteader in the Outer Rim," Obi-Wan said. "She and Didi sold the café to Dexter Jettster and moved out there. I'll miss them. Didi introduced me to Dexter before he left. The first time I met him I didn't trust him, and now that I've met him a few more times I *still* don't trust him." Obi-Wan flashed a rare grin. "All I can say is that Dex is a character. Come and meet him."

Obi-Wan threaded through tables crowded with beings from all over the galaxy. He waved at Dexter, a large, four-armed and formidable presence behind the bar.

"Well, if it isn't Obi-Wan Kenobi. Glad to see you make an appearance," Dexter boomed. "I was hoping you'd still come around, even though Didi is gone. Naturally I will give you the same treatment." Dexter grinned hugely. "Except for the discount, of course!"

Obi-Wan laughed and pushed over a few credits. "This is my Padawan Learner, Anakin Skywalker. Some juma juice for the two of us. And some information."

Dexter deftly poured the bright yellow juice into two glasses. "Sure. If I have it."

"Have you heard of someone called Granta Omega?" Obi-Wan asked, pushing the juice toward Anakin.

Dexter frowned. "No. The name isn't familiar. I'll ask around, if you like."

"Thanks." Obi-Wan took a sip of juice as he turned to Anakin. "It was worth a shot. Dexter might have information for us one day. Then we will track Omega."

"And until then?" Anakin asked. He felt a little better. At least Obi-Wan was thinking of going after Omega at some point.

## STAR WARS: The Trail of the Jedi

Obi-Wan pointed to Anakin's glass. "Until then, drink your juice." Obi-Wan waited until Anakin had taken a sip. "I owe you an apology, Padawan."

Anakin tore his gaze away from two odd species playing sabaac in a corner. "For what, Master?"

"You said I never share my thoughts. Instead of answering, I corrected you." Obi-Wan stared down into his juice. "It is not easy for me to share my thoughts, or my feelings. And sometimes it is necessary that I do not. When I was your age, I felt the same as you do. I thought Master and Padawan had to share everything."

"Don't they?"

"No," Obi-Wan said. "There are times when you do not need to know what I am thinking. You must trust that I know best."

Anakin shook his head. "That's hard for me. I want to know everything."

"That is a quality I treasure in you," Obi-Wan said. "But it is also a quality you must learn to control." He gave Anakin a significant look. "There are things you keep from me, too."

"Not so!" Anakin protested.

"Midnight raids on junk heaps below the surface of Coruscant...a plan to build your own power converter..."

Anakin grinned. "Caught." He was starting to feel better.

He had worried that Obi-Wan did not have room for him in his heart. But Shmi's smile rose in Anakin's mind. *Hearts have infinite room, my son.*

It was one of her favorite sayings. Anakin sighed. He wished he could combine Obi-Wan's cool judgment with his mother's goodness. Someday. Maybe then his Master would trust him enough to let him tangle again with the Sith.

Perhaps he would never have a Master-Padawan relationship as deep and trusting as Obi-Wan had with Qui-Gon. Perhaps Obi-Wan kept him as a Padawan in order to fulfill a dying wish. But maybe it didn't matter how it happened.

## Jude Watson

He should not focus on what he didn't have. He had this. This was his. And that was something. He would work hard. He would be a great Padawan. And Obi-Wan would come to love him. He would make him do so.

"I think I know what you're thinking," Obi-Wan said, noting Anakin's sigh. "It was not the training mission I thought it would be, either. I thought I had things to teach you. Instead, you taught me."

"I taught you?" Anakin was surprised. "What?"

"That I am not Qui-Gon," Obi-Wan said. "And you are not me. Simple as that."

"Simple is sometimes best," Anakin said, repeating Obi-Wan's words.

"We are on a journey together, Padawan." Obi-Wan clicked his glass lightly against Anakin's. "We will forge our own path. Let us drink to that."

Across Dexter's café, someone watched the two Jedi. Someone with cool eyes behind dark-lensed goggles. Someone who had recently removed the synth-flesh that had knitted into his skin, leaving his skin raw. But no one looked twice at anyone else in Dexter's café. It was too dangerous and could provoke violence.

*Go ahead, enjoy your drinks and your smiles, Jedi. You escaped for now. Yet I am not angry. I am only amused. It only gives me more time to play with you. You met me once, but you won't recognize me the next time. You'll look, but you won't see. You think I left the case behind by accident? I don't make mistakes. I just enjoy opportunities. And I make my own.*

*In other words, Jedi—we'll meet again soon.*







**Book Three**  
**The Dangerous Games**



STAR  
WARS®

# JEDI QUEST

BY JUDE WATSON

THE DANGEROUS GAMES





## Chapter One

The spacelanes of the planet Euceron were jammed with vehicles. In the upper atmosphere, large transports and sleek passenger liners chugged in orbit. Despite the heavy presence of spacelane officers on high-altitude swoops, tempers flared as star cruisers and shuttle craft jockeyed for position outside the landing platforms.

Fourteen-year-old Anakin Skywalker swerved the Galan starfighter to avoid a cruiser trying to cut in the line waiting to land. “Watch it, you gravel-maggot!” he yelled, even though he knew the pilot couldn’t hear him.

Beside him his Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, cleared his throat.

“I know, I know,” Anakin said. “Feel my anger, and let it go. But do I have to be a Jedi all the time, even in space traffic?” He flashed a grin at his Master. He knew the answer.

“You are a Jedi every moment,” Obi-Wan said. “Even when another cruiser is sneaking in to your right.”

“What?” Anakin wrenched his attention back to his piloting. A silver star cruiser was attempting to nose in—Anakin swerved to the left and then slid neatly into the empty slot ahead.

Obi-Wan leaned back in his seat. “If you allowed someone to cut in line, we would lose five minutes’ time. Would that be so bad?”

## Jude Watson

His Master could always find an opportunity for a lesson, even while waiting to land in a crowded spacelane. “I guess not,” Anakin said. “We’re not in a hurry. But it’s not right for them to try to sneak ahead of others.”

“No,” Obi-Wan said. “But that is the other pilot’s choice. By trying to prevent him, you are feeding your own anger and impatience. Perhaps that is worse.”

Anakin saw his Master’s point. That was the trouble. Obi-Wan always made sense. The only problem was that Obi-Wan didn’t understand how good it felt when Anakin had zoomed ahead, preventing the cruiser from cutting in.

The spacelane officer ahead signaled to Anakin. A new lane had opened up for landings. Anakin slid the craft neatly into place. Now that he was first in line, he could look around and enjoy the sight of so many star cruisers in one atmosphere.

“I knew it would be crowded on Euceron, but I didn’t expect this,” Anakin said. “At least on Coruscant the traffic is strictly controlled. This is a mess.”

“Euceron isn’t used to such traffic,” Obi-Wan agreed. “Beings come from all over the galaxy to the Galactic Games.”

“I didn’t realize they would all arrive at once.” Anakin wasn’t really grumbling. He enjoyed the chaos, the scramble for lane space, the chance to see so many different kinds of star cruisers.

When he had first learned of the mission ahead, Anakin couldn’t believe his luck. All he and his Master had to do was patrol the Galactic Games, keeping alert for any signs of trouble. The Galactic Games were held every seven years, and planets all over the galaxy competed to become the host planet. The Games were exciting and sometimes dangerous, with the fastest and most skilled competing in races and contests. Anakin couldn’t wait to see the various events.

The government of Euceron had asked for Jedi help in order to keep the peace. In only seven years, the galaxy had changed. New trouble spots erupted far too often. Some systems had grievances with the Senate; some planets had trade conflicts with

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

other planets. Beings from many different worlds would be in close quarters, some of them hostile to one another. It could be a volatile mix.

Then again, everyone was coming to have a good time. Anakin knew that he was. The Galactic Games had been started over eight decades before in order to promote peace through sport. Winners became famous both on their own planets and in places they had never traveled. Even as a slave on Tatooine, Anakin had heard tales of their determination and mastery.

“Euceron is trying its best to keep things under control,” Obi-Wan observed. “The leaders of the Ruling Power don’t want anything to go wrong. They are trying to gain more power in the Senate, to be put on some very important committees. This is a crucial way to show that their planet is stable.”

Anakin nodded, a bit bored by Senatorial politics. He was notified that he could land now on the Euceron City landing platform. A series of laser signals told him which slot to take. He came in fast and low, executing a quick turn that dropped the starfighter into position perfectly. He glanced over at his Master, knowing he had been a bit of a show-off, but Obi-Wan was already beginning arrival procedures.

Anakin reached for their survival packs and activated the landing ramp, which led to the greeting center high above the capital city, Eusebus. He couldn’t wait to get going.

“This will be a good opportunity for you to reflect on a new Jedi lesson,” Obi-Wan said. “Connection with the Living Force. There are beings from all over the galaxy here. You’ll pick up many kinds of energies. With such a variety of beings crowded onto one planet, there is much to learn.”

“Yes, Master.” Anakin hovered by the doorway, waiting impatiently while Obi-Wan double-checked to make sure the cabin of their craft was secure. He made sure to keep his body still, however. He might not have conquered his agitation though he had learned to mask it.

## Jude Watson

But it was rare that his Master did not pick up on his feelings. Obi-Wan noted his impatience. “All right, young Padawan. Let’s go.”

Anakin walked out onto the landing ramp, his eyes eagerly sweeping the platform. Star pilots chatted in small groups, children dashed past parents’ reaching fingers, air taxis unloaded passengers who lunged for their luggage—Wookiees and Babbs and everything in between. Everyone seemed in a terrific hurry to get somewhere. And the Games had not yet begun!

“Are you picking up anything about the mission ahead?” Obi-Wan asked him curiously. His Master often asked the question as soon as they stepped foot on a planet. Sometimes he even asked it before they landed, if he sensed that Anakin was swept by intuitions about the mission to come.

Anakin reached out to the Force. Sometimes it felt so easy. The Force was there, right within his grasp, and he could fold it around himself as easily as slipping into his travel cloak.

“I don’t feel darkness here,” he said. “I feel tremendous energy. It is not all good, but it isn’t dark. It’s just...”

“Life,” Obi-Wan finished. “Emotion, expectation, hope, worry, excitement.”

“It feels more intense,” Anakin said slowly as they walked through the crowd.

“Because it is,” Obi-Wan said. “We are all packed into one small city, waiting for a big event.” He paused to consult a coordinates kiosk. “We will be staying in the official Games quarters, but let’s explore a bit first.”

They squeezed aboard a crowded turbolift that brought them down from the greeting center to the surface of the planet. They spilled out onto the main boulevard of Eusebus. The streets were crowded with speeders of every kind and description, and the many beings jostled and pushed their way to their destinations. Large overhead signs blinked out directions and routes, such as STADIUM ONE: LEFT ON USIRINE STREET or STADIUM TEN: TAKE AIR TRANSIT GREEN.



## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

The aroma of the various food stands wafted toward them. Anakin's stomach growled. Meat sizzled on grills and sweets hung from slender poles that danced in the brisk wind, tantalizing him. He had eaten his morning meal only an hour before, but he suddenly felt hungry.

"Look around," Obi-Wan directed. "Tell me if you see anything out of the ordinary."

The ordinary? There didn't seem to be anything ordinary in Euceron City. It was a city built entirely of plastoid materials, since there was no native stone. The buildings were brightly colored and no higher than twenty stories. Eucerons were a humanoid species with large domed heads and delicate limbs. They dressed in neutral colors as if to offset their colorful structures.

But Obi-Wan had seen something Anakin should have noted. Anakin screened out his rapidly growing appetite and opened his mind to careful observation. It took him a few minutes, but then he felt it.

"There are security officers everywhere," he said. "They are not in uniform, but they are patrolling." He could tell they were security only by noting their watchful eyes constantly sweeping the crowd.

"Yes. Nicely observed, Padawan," Obi-Wan said. "Euceron has the largest security force in the galaxy for its size. The Ruling Power needs the security officers to keep the population under control. It is government by repression and intimidation. The Ruling Power is made up of ten rulers who make all laws and decisions. The city looks peaceful and prosperous, but the Ruling Power has been working for years to make it look that way. They are cultivating an image, and they are typically aggressive about their methods."

"So why should the Jedi help them?" Anakin wondered.

"The Ruling Power is not the kind of government the Senate would normally support," Obi-Wan agreed. "But the safety of many beings depends on the Games proceeding well, and that is

## Jude Watson

important for the continued peace of the galaxy itself. So don't forget that this mission is a serious one. There are always beings in the galaxy who use these large gatherings for their own ends. Sabotage is always a possibility, so the Jedi are needed."

"Are we supposed to meet with the other Jedi teams?" Anakin asked. He hoped to see Tru Veld, a fellow Padawan and one of his few friends at the Temple.

"Yes. We'll need to coordinate our patrols," Obi-Wan said. "We'll see them at our quarters later."

Obi-Wan did not break his stride, but suddenly his concentration shifted. Anakin could see the change.

"Something is wrong," he murmured.

Anakin threw his own attention out like a net. He was aware of a change in the sound of the crowd. "A disturbance," he said.

"This way." Obi-Wan stepped up his pace. He threaded through the pedestrians.

Ahead was a large square. Food stalls were packed in tightly, and cafés ringed the edges.

Anakin saw a knot of beings across the square. They were packed so tightly it was difficult to see what they were looking at.

He heard a roar of anger. He did not know the language, but it was easy to guess the intent.

"Hurry." Obi-Wan tried to make it through the crowd, but the beings were crowded so densely now that it was impossible.

"Get out of my way or I'll kill you!" Someone shouted the words in Basic.

Now Anakin could see a Phlog, a giant being with a vibroword, standing over a small Ortolan, a blue-furred creature armed with only a cup of juice. The Phlog waved the vibroword close to his neighbor's nose. Instead of retreating, the crowd surged forward, interested in a possible fight.

"Go ahead, you tub of bantha fat," the Ortolan sneered.

"This isn't good," Obi-Wan muttered.

Suddenly the Phlog took his vibroword and slashed through a small stone table. The group who had been sitting at it fell

## **STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games**

backward. One of them sprang up and withdrew a blaster. The giant Phlog grabbed both huge slabs of stone and lifted them over his head.

“I’ll kill you all!”

Frustrated, Obi-Wan tried to get through the crowd. The beings had formed a solid wall of flesh and muscle. The Jedi could not move. But they weren’t about to fail in their objective before the Games had even begun.

## Chapter Two

Anakin saw a sudden flash of blue. A lightsaber danced in the air and came down, slicing expertly through the thick slabs of stone. The movement was so fast that a tiny curl of smoke was the only evidence of the lightsaber's trail. The slabs dissolved into rocks and dust. The Phlog howled as one of the stone pieces fell on his foot.

"That should slow you down a minute."

Jedi Knight Siri's tone was pleasant, but it rang with the shimmer of durasteel. Next to her stood Ferus Olin, her Padawan. His lightsaber was raised and ready, his expression hard. He was prepared to spring if anyone moved, and everyone seemed to know it. A hush settled on the crowd.

The Phlog stood awkwardly, holding his foot. "Who are you?" he bellowed.

The Euceron whose table had been pulverized quickly shoved his blaster into his belt. "Ah, Jedi. Just defending myself," he muttered, backing away.

The Ortolan nodded rapidly, his blue fur flying. "Easy in such crowds to bump by accident."

"Exactly," Siri said. "So an apology is called for."

"Sorry," the Ortolan said quickly.

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

“By both of you,” Siri said meaningfully, her gaze boring into Phlog, who towered several meters over her blond head.

The Phlog hesitated. He was not accustomed to apologizing for his temper. Even with a lightsaber centimeters from his neck.

For a moment, it seemed that the Phlog would launch an attack on Siri. She was ready.

By now Obi-Wan and Anakin had snaked through the crowd and were standing by, close enough to spring forward if needed. With a look, Obi-Wan told Anakin to hang back.

Ferus Olin stepped forward. “Think twice, my friend,” he said in a soft tone. “Then think again.”

Anakin saw the admiration on his Master’s face at the coolness of Ferus’s approach. A flare of jealousy rose inside him. Ferus always knew the right thing to say and the right way to say it. Ferus was only two years older than Anakin, but he was known for his maturity.

“Well, well, my fault,” the Phlog said in false cheerfulness. “Let me buy you another juice.”

He bent over the small Ortolan and led him into the café.

Siri deactivated her lightsaber. “There. Everyone is sorry. Incident over.” Her clear voice sailed out over the crowd. “We can all get back to what we were doing.”

The crowd that had been eager to witness a brawl suddenly melted away. Siri caught sight of Obi-Wan.

“Just a minute too late, as usual,” she said.

“We were just waiting to see how you’d handle it,” Obi-Wan answered. “I always wanted to see you go against a Phlog.”

Anakin watched Obi-Wan and Siri. A stranger would never know that they were old friends.

He nodded a greeting at Ferus, who nodded stiffly back. There was no need to pretend that they liked each other. Ferus had warned him once that he did not trust him and would keep an eye on him. This had infuriated Anakin, and he still wasn’t over it. He had let his anger go, but his resentment still

## Jude Watson

simmered. He knew how a Jedi was supposed to handle that, but he couldn't.

He could not speak to Obi-Wan about it, either. He didn't want his Master to know that a fellow Padawan, especially one as gifted and respected as Ferus, did not trust him.

He turned his attention back to Siri and Obi-Wan, who were talking in low voices.

"...with the crowds like this," Obi-Wan was saying. "It was hard to get to you at all."

"And where was security?" Siri asked. "I saw officers all around undercover, but when they were needed, they were strangely absent."

"Perhaps fewer of them should be undercover," Obi-Wan suggested. "Some should be more visible."

Siri frowned. "The Eucérons hate the security forces. That's why they're undercover. But still, with so many visitors, keeping the peace is the first order of business."

"I'll talk to Liviani Sarno about it," Obi-Wan said, referring to the head of the Games Council.

Anakin couldn't believe it. Obi-Wan hadn't seen Siri in a while, and he only spoke of the mission! Anakin had great respect for Obi-Wan's wisdom, but sometimes he wondered how his Master could connect to the Living Force when his feelings were kept so tightly under wraps.

"Anakin!" Anakin heard the cheerful voice behind him and quickly turned. Tru Veld was loping across the plaza next to his Master, the tall and silent Ry-Gaul. Tru extended one long, flexible arm in a floppy wave that conveyed his excitement and happiness at seeing his friend. He and Tru had been in the same year of training at the Temple, but they had become friends after they had been chosen as Padawans.

Ry-Gaul nodded at Obi-Wan and Siri as they came up, but gave no verbal greeting. The three Masters huddled together for a discussion, leaving the three Padawans to talk among themselves.

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

"I can't decide, can you?" Tru asked Anakin, his eyes dancing. They were the color of the silver seas of Teevan, his home planet, and when he was excited they sparkled like sunlight on waves.

Anakin was used to Tru starting a conversation midway through. He lifted an eyebrow at him.

"Which Game events to attend," Tru explained. "They all sound fun."

"We are here to keep the peace," Ferus said. "Not to have fun."

Annoyance ran through Anakin. Ferus could spoil a good mood quicker than a double nova. Tru merely shook his head good-naturedly and nudged Ferus with a shoulder. "Relax, friend. I can keep the peace and watch the Games, too. Even our Masters will allow that."

"We haven't received our instructions," Ferus said.

"I am sure our instructions will be to avoid having a good time at all costs," Tru said to Ferus in a mock-serious tone, his eyes still twinkling with silent amusement.

Ferus sighed. "Padawans are always trying to get me to relax," he said. "I'm just not made that way."

Siri, Ry-Gaul, and Obi-Wan turned away from their conference and approached their Padawans.

"We've decided that you three can go off on your own for a while," Obi-Wan told them. "But be sure your comlinks are functioning at all times."

Anakin and Tru exchanged an excited glance. They hadn't expected this good fortune. They had hoped to run into each other, but now they could actually attend at least some of the Games together! Anakin would even put up with Ferus if it meant he could spend time with Tru.

"I contacted Liviani Sarno. She's on her way here," Obi-Wan told them. "After we receive a briefing, you'll be free to go. Then we'll all meet back at the Games quarters for the evening meal."

## Jude Watson

Within moments they saw a tall female Euceron heading toward them. She was dressed in a scarlet robe embroidered with orange and gold threads, and her crown of braids was woven with bright jewels. Liviani Sarno was not hard to spot.

Traveling in her wake were three other beings, and Anakin was surprised that he knew two of them. He had met Didi and Astri when they still owned the Coruscant café that Dexter Jettster now ran. He knew that they had been close to Qui-Gon Jinn and were friends with Obi-Wan as well.

Didi's round brown eyes widened when he saw Obi-Wan. Astri ran forward, her pretty face flushed.

"Obi-Wan!" Dark curls flying, Astri threw herself at Obi-Wan, wrapping her arms around him. Anakin was surprised to see his reserved Master break out into a huge smile and hug Astri back. Didi came up and tried to hug both of them, but his plump arms were too short. He settled for thumping Obi-Wan on the back.

"This makes my eyes new and my heart glad!" Didi cried.

"It is so good to see you!" Astri exclaimed.

"It is good to see you, too," Obi-Wan said. "You are here to see the Games?"

"In an official capacity," Astri said. "I'd like you to meet my husband, Bog Divinian. He's on the Games Council. Bog, this is the great Jedi Knight, Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Bog Divinian was a tall, handsome man in a plumfruit-colored tunic almost as bright as Liviani Sarno's.

"I am honored to meet a Jedi," Bog said. "Do you know Liviani Sarno?"

"This is our first meeting," Obi-Wan said with a quick nod. He introduced the Padawans. Siri coolly assessed the Council member. Ry-Gaul stood silent.

"We are glad the Jedi accepted the request of the Ruling Power to monitor the Games," Liviani said. "We can use the help. Many more came than we expected."



## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

“We have to keep things running smoothly,” Bog added. “Liviani is doing an amazing job of organization.”

Liviani inclined her head in the fashion of one who is used to compliments.

“If you need an insider’s perspective, I’ll be glad to help,” Bog added, speaking to Obi-Wan. “Because you’re such a good friend of Astri’s, I’ll make time for you.”

Obi-Wan’s polite expression did not falter, but Siri’s ice-blue eyes flashed at the notion that Bog would only help the Jedi because one of them was a personal friend. Ry-Gaul just blinked impassively.

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan said smoothly. No doubt he had noticed Astri’s embarrassment.

“Obi-Wan Kenobi is the greatest of all Jedi Knights,” Didi said proudly. “He will not need our help, I guarantee.” He suddenly realized that he had insulted Siri and Ry-Gaul and turned to them quickly. “Not that Siri and Ry-Gaul aren’t equally great. All Jedi are great!” Didi beamed at all of them. “Even Padawans!”

“How are the preparations going?” Obi-Wan asked Liviani. “Any problems?”

“So smoothly, no problems,” Bog Divinian answered. “The Games Council is handling everything beautifully. Maxo Vista is a native of Euceron and on the Council, and he has been very helpful. You know of him, of course.”

Obi-Wan shook his head politely. Anakin couldn’t believe his Master didn’t know the great Euceron hero who had stunned the galaxy seven years before by winning five events at the Galactic Games on Berrun.

“But everyone knows Maxo Vista!” Bog said, surprised. “He is renowned throughout the galaxy! He might not be wealthy, but he *is* famous. And he is a good friend of mine, so if you need an introduction...”

## Jude Watson

Siri snorted, then tried to turn it into a cough. Anakin remembered that Obi-Wan had told him that Siri had never done very well in her diplomacy classes at the Temple.

Even Didi looked embarrassed at Bog's bragging. He smiled at the Jedi in turn. "Who needs galactic heroes when we have Jedi?"

"Precisely," Liviani said crisply. "And Bog is wrong about our not having problems."

Bog looked crestfallen at having disappointed Liviani. "I know of no problems, Liviani."

Liviani ignored Bog and turned to the Jedi. "There are rumors that there will be an illegal Podrace on the outskirts of the city."

Anakin suddenly became very interested.

Siri frowned. "We had not heard this."

Liviani nodded. "Podracers from all over the galaxy have been spotted arriving on Euceron. We have heard that they are gathering on the city's northern border in the Great Dordon Caves, whose extensive tunnels are, unfortunately, ideally suited for this suicidal sport."

"Podracing is illegal in the Core Worlds," Bog said disapprovingly. "If I were Senator—I am running for Senator of my home planet of Nuralee, by the way—I would consider introducing a law to outlaw Podracing galaxy-wide. It only promotes gambling and violence." Bog gave a quick glance at Liviani to see if she approved of his declaration.

Liviani continued to ignore him, however. "You see our problem," she said to the Jedi. "The Ruling Power is worried about bad publicity, so it wants us to ignore the rumors. If Podracers die in the caves, no one will care, officially." Liviani's delicate eyebrows drew together in a worried frown. "But the authorities underestimate how popular these races are. Beings will hear of them. Betting will take place, and spectators—some of them quite important on their home planets—will find the race. We cannot guarantee safety and crowd control."

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

“The Games must proceed smoothly,” Bog added. “Absolutely.”

Anakin barely heard their voices. His brain had started to buzz as soon as he'd heard the word *Podrace*. He hadn't seen or been in one since he was a slave on Tatooine.

It was as though the thick clouds overhead parted, for suddenly he felt the blow of the hot suns of Tatooine on the back of his neck. He could taste the grit of sand between his teeth. And he could feel the rise of the same fierce desire that had filled him as a young boy, the simplest, most powerful feeling he knew: the will to win.

Anakin felt his Master's eyes on him, as though the surge of feeling had touched Obi-Wan like a warning finger. A mask of serenity dropped over Anakin's face. He could call it up at will for times such as this, times when his blood seemed to race closer to his skin.

Liviani was speaking, and Obi-Wan turned back to her. Anakin kept his expression calm but interested. Like a Jedi would be. But inside...inside he was a slave boy, on fire to race again.

## Chapter Three

Does he really think he's fooling me?

Obi-Wan's exasperation with his Padawan did not show on his face. Anakin's attempts to hide his excitement may have tricked the others, but Obi-Wan felt it charge the air. He had never seen Anakin compete in a Podrace, and Qui-Gon had not given him many details, but he knew how outrageously dangerous Podracing was. Pilots sat in open cockpits, racing fragile crafts that were powered by massive engines tethered to the racer by flexible cables. Obi-Wan could imagine that the prospect of Anakin once again pitting his skills and reflexes and daring in such a race would be irresistible.

But it would not be worthy of a Jedi. Jedi did not seek thrills.

Obi-Wan could understand a momentary tug toward the past. He would expect his Padawan to overcome it. A longing for such things was childish, in his opinion. As soon as they were alone, he would speak to Anakin about it...

"Obi-Wan, my friend?" Didi spoke in a low tone at his elbow. "A word?"

Liviani had received a call on her comlink and had turned away, so Obi-Wan followed Didi a few paces away from the others.

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

"I just wanted to say," Didi began, smoothing his tunic with plump fingers, "how my entire being is convulsed with joy to see your handsome and noble face once again—"

"You want a favor," Obi-Wan said flatly. He was fond of Didi, but he did not for one second think that Didi would hesitate to take advantage of their friendship.

Didi looked wounded. "Not a favor. Some company on a little errand—"

Obi-Wan began to turn away in dismissal.

"All right, all right! The truth! A favor!" Didi said quickly. He spread his hands, palms out. "But such a tiny one it hardly qualifies."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes for a second in irritation. *Qui-Gon would ask for my patience.* "What is it?"

"Shortly after arriving in Eusebus, I bought a swoop bike," Didi said. "I thought it would make navigating these crowded streets much easier. However, hardly had I gone two meters when the engine...whoosh, ka-blam!" Didi's fingers traced an explosion in the air. "I want my money back, yet I fear that slimy son of a monkey-lizard will refuse me."

"But not if a Jedi is along," Obi-Wan said wearily.

"You would not have to do a thing! Just stand there and look invincible. Maybe casually take your lightsaber out and test it..."

"No. No lightsaber."

"Then your presence only." Didi put his hands together. "Such a big favor it would be, and I would repay it a thousand times over."

"Do you really think," Obi-Wan said, exasperated, "that I have time to help you make up a bad deal?"

"Of course not, you are so busy being strong and good," Didi said. "But while we are together, I can give you a behind-the-scenes, sneak-peek look at the Games. Bog is my son-in-law and on the Council. I have a unique perspective." Didi could see that Obi-Wan was unmoved. "Now, don't do it for Qui-Gon's sake. I would never want you to remember how much he loved me and

## Jude Watson

how many times he helped me. Don't even mention his beloved name!"

"I don't have to," Obi-Wan said. "You just did." But he knew from the first moment that Didi had drawn him aside that he would help him. The truth was that Obi-Wan had a soft spot for Didi just as vulnerable as Qui-Gon's had been. And he had come to see that it wasn't such a bad thing, to feel affection for a worthless scoundrel with a big heart.

Still, there were limits.

"I will give you ten minutes," Obi-Wan said.

"You are the best and kindest friend I ever—"

"Nine minutes, fifty-seven seconds—"

Didi's mouth snapped shut. "I will tell Astri. One moment."

Didi dashed off, and Siri came up next to Obi-Wan. "You are worse than Qui-Gon," she said in an amused tone.

Obi-Wan shrugged. "I am still his Padawan in many ways."

"Ry-Gaul and I are going with Liviani. She has some swoops available for us so we can get an overview of the area. We're sending the Padawans off on their own. The opening rituals will begin in a few minutes."

"I'll keep in touch and meet up with you," Obi-Wan said. "This won't take long."

Siri cocked her head. Her hands slid into the pockets of the unisuit she wore instead of a tunic. "The amazing thing is that you actually believe that," she said.

## Chapter Four

When Anakin had first seen Tru, he had immediately wanted to spend time with him. Now he could hardly wait to leave him behind. This wasn't Tru's fault—Anakin just wanted time alone to explore. About Podracing.

He walked alongside Ferus and Tru. The streets were crowded and they had trouble staying together. Ferus didn't seem to notice. He strode ahead at the pace he always set, talking without making sure the others were able to hear.

"The opening rituals are at Stadium One," Ferus said. "We could take an air taxi, but there don't seem to be many around."

"We can get there on Transit Yellow," Tru said. "Four stops. I memorized the transit system maps on the way here."

"It's the perfect opportunity for us to see all sorts of beings from all over the galaxy," Ferus said. "We should observe customs and protocol."

Leave it to Ferus to have a lesson plan for the afternoon, *Anakin thought*.

As if he had read Anakin's thoughts and was afraid he would speak them aloud, Tru extended one flexible arm and slid his hand over Anakin's mouth.

Anakin batted it away with a grin. No doubt Tru was remembering their mission to the planet Radnor, when Anakin

## Jude Watson

and Ferus had argued every step of the way. But Anakin had no desire to argue with Ferus again. He didn't care about him enough to argue.

He had more important things to do—like check out the Podracers. Anakin told himself that someone on the Jedi teams needed to do so. Logically, he was the best candidate. He was the only one who had raced, and he was sure to know some of the beings involved. He hadn't raced since he was eight years old, six and a half years ago. But the racers tended to keep racing, if they weren't killed.

Of course, Obi-Wan hadn't asked him to check out the Podracers. But he had left him free to choose what he wanted to see. Anakin assured himself that he wasn't disobeying Obi-Wan by going.

Still, he didn't want to advertise his plans to his fellow Padawans. He could trust Tru, but Ferus was another matter. It would be just like Ferus to make a big deal of it.

"I'll catch up with you later," he told Ferus and Tru. "I have something I need to check out first."

Disappointment clouded Tru's silvery eyes. "Oh?"

Anakin knew that Tru had been looking forward to spending time with him, too. When you made friends among the Jedi, you treasured the times you were together because they could be rare.

Ferus gave him a glance that was more pointed. "Obi-Wan asked you to do something?"

Anakin could not lie. Not even to Ferus. He pretended he had not heard him over the noise of the crowd. He turned to go, and Tru leaned over and spoke softly in his ear. "Transit Red, end of the line."

So Tru did know where he was headed.

"You're a good friend," Anakin said as he dashed off before Ferus could say anything more.

Eusebus had converted its largest air taxis to a free transit system. He found Transit Red and hopped aboard. He didn't mind missing the opening rituals, which no doubt would be filled



## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

with parading teams and boring speeches. The real fun was taking place elsewhere.

At the last stop on Transit Red, the buildings ended abruptly. There was no gradual thinning of structures. An apartment block ended, the road narrowed, and the horizon was before him. There appeared to be nothing in sight but bare hills.

*Now what?* Anakin wondered as he descended from the air taxi and looked from right to left.

He closed his eyes and summoned the Force. He felt it rise from the red dust and bound off the hills back at him. And then he felt the Living Force as a wave that gathered momentum and broke over him in a shower of light.

There.

He took off toward the hills to his left. Well, if this mission was supposed to teach him about the Living Force, he doubted there was much to learn. Sometimes he thought he was in better touch with the Living Force than his Master. Obi-Wan lived in his head. His emotions were reserved. Anakin often had no idea what his Master felt or thought. Sometimes he seemed to respond to the beings they met on their travels simply as ways to get something accomplished. A scrappy pilot with hair-raising stories of smuggling tech parts through the Outer Rim systems was just a means to get from the Manda spaceport to Circarpous Major. A tavern owner who kept pet dinkos was a contact to discover the location of a possible weapons cache. A young brother and sister bounty-hunting team was taken along just to provide an answer to the mystery of who was behind a Jedi's kidnapping.

It wasn't that Obi-Wan lacked compassion, Anakin mused. It was just that there was a little more distance between him and other living beings. Qui-Gon had not been able to pass along his connection to the Living Force to his Padawan, Anakin felt.

Anakin treasured his Master. But sometimes he wondered what it would have been like to have Qui-Gon as a Master instead. Would Qui-Gon have shared his feelings more easily?

## Jude Watson

Anakin had felt a connection to Qui-Gon from the start. It had taken more time with Obi-Wan. It was still taking time.

He reached the hills, which were covered with thorny green bushes and small, squat trees. Anakin followed the hillside until he spotted scorch marks, then an abandoned hydrospanner. He was close.

He strode forward ten meters, pushed aside a dense covering of leaves, and found the cave opening. He walked inside, already feeling the presence of living beings. The cave opened out as he walked. There were two security guards, but they were unaware of Anakin's silent tread. Soon the ceiling soared a hundred meters over his head.

He heard the clang of metal. The muffled sound of shouts and curses. The whine and sputter of engines being tuned and tweaked. The roar of powerful turbines. Someone whistling off-tune and someone else shouting at him to stop or he'd shove an oily rag down his slimy throat.

Anakin smiled. It sounded like home.

The cave opened out and he saw a makeshift pit hangar set up ahead. Podracers were parked haphazardly while beings of every size and description and varying degrees of oil-soaked clothing worked on them. Pit droids scuttled about, hauling huge lubricant hoses and tugging power cell chargers.

He stopped at the edge and watched for a moment. Hydrospanners clanged and macrofusers flew. Someone yelled for a fusioncutter. Some of the Podracer pilots sat on elaborate folding chairs, sipping grog or tea and keeping a watchful eye on their mechanics. Other pilots, not yet rich enough to have someone else to tweak their engines, worked steadily and with enormous concentration. The smallest mistake could cause a Podracer to turn a fraction too sluggishly, resulting in a spectacular crash.

Anakin recognized Aldar Beedo, a Glymphid he had raced against several times. He was surprised Beedo was still alive, let alone racing. Beedo had never been particularly skillful, but he'd

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

been cunning and fearless and willing to cheat, and that had made him more successful at Podracing than he had any right to be. Anakin would have thought he'd have crashed or been run out of the Podraces by this time. Then again, there wasn't much policing of Podracing. Race officials attempted to keep some sort of control, but Podracers schemed to get away with as much as they could.

Anakin noticed a Podracer mechanic nearby. He could only see a pair of short legs sticking out from underneath while another mechanic stood near the console, pushing buttons in what appeared to be a random fashion. The two mechanics were Aleenas. He recognized their three-toed feet and bluish scaly skin. The Podracer looked familiar. It had been re-painted and buffed, but he was sure he recognized it. He took a couple of steps closer.

"Doby, hand me that hydrospanner, will you? I've almost got this fused. Then we can start her up again."

A hydrospanner twirled through the air, nearly taking off the tip of Anakin's nose. A hand reached up from underneath the Podracer and caught it.

"Go ahead and use it, but I'm telling you, Deland, it's not the joint," the mechanic at the console said. "No chance, never ever. If the engine overheats during gear switches, it's got to be a sensor problem."

"But the sensor doesn't show a problem, blope-head."

"That's the problem, bantha-breath. If you'd just let me finish checking out the sensor suite..."

"I've been doing this longer than you have, baby brother, so slap your flapping lips shut."

"You're only fourteen months older..."

"Fourteen and a half. And I'm the pilot. You're the mechanic."

"My point exact—"

## Jude Watson

“Got it!” A face stained with grease appeared in a pair of grimy welding goggles. Deland sprang to his feet in one motion. “Let’s fire her up.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Anakin said.

Doby and Deland peered at him from behind their goggles.

“And we should listen to you because?” Deland asked.

Anakin took a step closer. “Because if your engine is overheating during gear changes, the problem could be in the current filter. Have you used an impulse detector?” The words flowed easily, like a native language he had not spoken in years but would never forget.

“Not that it’s your business, but yes,” Doby said. “It didn’t show anything wrong.”

“Then it’s definitely the current filter,” Anakin said. “It’s clogged.”

“Slap it shut, you son of a durkii,” Deland warned his brother. “This guy could be working for another Podracer. He’s just trying to spook us.”

Doby leaned toward his brother and said in a whisper, “Haven’t you noticed? He’s a Jedi.”

“He’s a fraud and a fake,” Deland hissed. “Sebulba probably hired him.”

Anakin felt a rush of heat that made his face flame. Back on Tatooine, Sebulba the Dug had tried to cheat his way to victory in the Boonta Eve race and nearly killed Anakin in the process. They had always sparred, though Sebulba had never taken him seriously enough to worry about him. Until the race on Boonta Eve, when he’d beaten him in an extremely close race. “Sebulba is still racing?”

“Everybody knows that,” Deland said. “Now I know you’re lying. Doby, fire up that engine!”

“You’re going to blow out the intake valves on the turbines,” Anakin warned.

In answer, Deland reached over and flipped on the engine. Anakin had already stepped out of the way. A loud explosion

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

blew Deland back onto the ground. Doby was almost blasted by a roar of fire from the left turbine. Anakin reached over and shut off the engine.

"I'll be a Kowakian monkey-lizard!" Doby cried. "You were right!"

Deland picked himself up and dusted off his leggings. "Lucky guess."

"Are you two related to Ratts Tyerell?" Anakin asked curiously. "I think I recognize this Podracer."

Doby nodded proudly. "He was our father. He died in the great Boonta Eve Classic six years ago. Did you know him?"

"I raced against him in that race," Anakin said. "He was one of the fastest. Incredibly quick reflexes."

"Not quick enough," Doby said sorrowfully.

"Lying again," Deland said to Anakin. "No human can be a Podracer."

"One was," Doby said. "A human child. A slave. He won his freedom, and after the race he disappeared. His name was—"

"Anakin Skywalker," Anakin supplied. "Pleased to meet you."

"Now you're a Jedi?" Doby asked in disbelief. "And you were a slave?"

"It's a strange galaxy," Anakin said with a grin.

"Totally true," Doby agreed.

"Don't want to interrupt this getting-to-know-you gush, but we have a job to do," Deland said gruffly.

"I'll help you if you want," Anakin said spontaneously. He'd love to get his hands on a Podracer engine again, but he knew Obi-Wan would certainly disapprove.

"What's in it for you?" Deland asked suspiciously.

"Who cares?" Doby asked. "He beat Sebulba, Deland! Now we have to." He turned to Anakin. "After our father died, we had no money, so our uncle sold our sister into slavery. Djulla's master is now Sebulba. We have to get her out of his clutches! We bet our Podracer that we'd win. Sebulba bet Djulla's freedom. This time, though, he's not racing. His son Hekula is."

## Jude Watson

"I'm sorry that your sister is a slave," Anakin said. "Do you know Shmi, my mother? She's a slave, too. Or she was, when I saw her last."

Doby shook his head. "Mos Espa is full of beings. We don't know them all."

Anakin blinked as tears filled his eyes, surprising him. For a moment, Shmi had seemed so close. But she was as far away as she always was. He turned away quickly, his gaze roaming around the makeshift hangar. He didn't see Sebulba. But he did see something familiar—his old Podracer. Could it be?

"Whose Podracer is that?" he asked, pointing it out.

"Hekula's," Deland said, giving it a glance.

Yes, it was definitely Anakin's old Podracer, a customized Radon-Ulzer. It had been painted and retooled, but he would recognize it anywhere. He knew Qui-Gon had sold the Podracer, but not to whom. Sebulba must have bought it. Anakin burned at the thought of Sebulba owning the Podracer he had built and maintained so lovingly.

A tall young Dug suddenly moved into Anakin's field of vision. "What are you looking at, spy?" he shouted.

"What I look at is not your concern," Anakin shot back.

"When it's my Podracer it is," the Dug hissed back. "Spy!"

"It's Hekula," Doby warned Anakin in a whisper. "Be careful."

Anakin looked at Sebulba's son carefully. He felt the dark side of the Force shimmer off him. He had taken after his father, that was clear.

A movement caught his eye. Another Dug had scuttled across the distance toward him.

Anakin found himself face-to-face with his old enemy, Sebulba.

## Chapter Five

Anakin's fingers itched for his lightsaber. The last time Sebulba had threatened him, he'd been just a child and untrained. Now he could dispatch Sebulba before the Dug could manage to blink.

But he saw immediately that Sebulba didn't recognize him. His gaze was hostile, but the hostility wasn't personal. He had no idea that Anakin was the young slave boy who had humiliated him in a race years before.

Anakin smiled again.

The smile infuriated Sebulba. "What are you smiling at? And how dare you bully my son!"

"He's wasn't bullying me, Father," Hekula whined in Huttese. "I am bullying him!"

"You were doing a very poor job of it," Anakin answered in Huttese. "But that doesn't surprise me."

"How dare you!" Sebulba roared. "Prepare to die!"

Deland quickly moved between them. "Who's talking about dying?" he said in a jovial tone. "Let's save that for the Podrace. Right, Hekula? I'd worry about crashing more than spies, if I were you. I've seen you race!"

Hekula's long head thrust toward Deland. "You'll choke on my dust, son of a Ratt!"

## Jude Watson

Sebulba was more clever than his son. He grinned craftily and shot a look at Djulla, who was standing by Hekula's Podracer, preparing a snack for the two Dugs. "I hope you're alive to see your sister wipe the floor under our feet," he hissed. "For the next fifty years!"

Anakin and Deland both tensed, ready to strike. In Sebulba's taunt Anakin heard every cruelty he and his mother had ever endured.

Doby grabbed the hems of Anakin's and Deland's tunics. "Just let them go," he murmured. "We'll win the race. That is our better best revenge."

Anakin saw Deland's hand clench and unclench. His own fingertips burned to slip his lightsaber from its sheath.

"Let's leave the cowards to their play," Sebulba sneered. He and Hekula slithered off, their footfalls clattering on the stony ground.

Deland wiped his oily hands with a rag viciously, as though wiping away the memory of Sebulba's taunt. "We've got to beat them. We've got to."

"He's fast," Doby said, watching Hekula and Sebulba return to their entourage. A look of pain crossed his face as Djulla handed Hekula a cup of juma juice and Hekula spat it out while shouting an insult. "He's just as cruel and dangerous as his father. Maybe more so, because he takes more chances."

Temptation loomed before Anakin. He could help Doby and Deland beat Hekula. He knew it. It was not part of his mission here. But Obi-Wan had allowed him to have free time. What better way to use it than free a slave from the grip of a harsh master?

"Sebulba taught him how to cheat, too," Deland said worriedly. "Come on, Doby. Let's get back to work."

"You can beat him." The certainty in Anakin's voice made the two brothers turn to face him. "With my help. Hekula has my old Podracer. I built it with my own hands. They may have painted it



## **STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games**

and buffed it, but I still know those engines. I know its weaknesses. I know how Sebulba cheats. I can help you win.”

Doby and Deland exchanged a glance. “We can’t ask you to do that,” Deland said.

“You’re not asking.”

“We can’t pay you,” Doby said. “All of our credits are tied up in the Podracer. We barely have enough to get home.”

“I don’t need credits. And I don’t need thanks,” Anakin said. “I just need you to win.”

## Chapter Six

“So you promised me inside information,” Obi-Wan said to Didi. They could not locate an air taxi, and all the Transits were full, so they had to walk to the swoop seller. Obi-Wan didn’t mind. It gave him a chance to get a feeling of the streets. He reached out to the Force and received nothing alarming back.

“My son-in-law is an idiot.”

“That’s not exactly the kind of information I had in mind,” Obi-Wan said mildly.

Didi sighed. “You’d think Astri would have more sense. Did I raise her to fall for the first tall, handsome idiot who walked through my door? I did not! Is it my fault she picked such a stiff-necked, rule-following, small-spirited, mid-Rim, mid-minded, puffed-up bonehead?”

“Well, at least he’s not a criminal,” Obi-Wan said. “Maybe Astri wanted a quieter life. Maybe she was tired of dealing with a rule-breaking, truth-stretching, scam-running scoundrel of a father.”

“So it *is* my fault,” Didi sniffed.

“Astri has always made her own choices, Didi. And they are hers to make. Now, you said you had insider news on the Games.”

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

“Bog thinks that by serving on the Council for the Games, he’ll get the backing of some important beings in the Senate, and that he’ll be assigned important committee assignments. All he does is talk, talk, talk about how important his role is and what it will mean for his future.” Didi mimicked a snore. “Honestly, I don’t know how Astri stands it. His big job has been arranging the seating for some big-shot Senators. Hoo-diggety-hoo.”

“Didi, you said you had *information*,” Obi-Wan said. “This is *complaining*.”

“I have plenty of information,” Didi said. “How can I not? Bog never stops talking. But he never says anything worth listening to. Oh, look, here we are.” Didi paused in front of a shop with closed durasteel shutters.

“It doesn’t look open,” Obi-Wan observed.

“Oh, it is. The seller just doesn’t want to attract too many customers.”

“Really. That doesn’t sound typical.”

“It’s a very exclusive shop.” Didi turned to him. “Remember, you don’t have to say anything. Just stand there and give that Jedi-ish look.”

“I think I can manage it,” Obi-Wan said dryly. “Tell me something, Didi. If you want to return a swoop, shouldn’t you have brought it with you?”

“I can fetch it in moments. No need to worry.”

Didi rapped a rhythmic knock on the door. Several seconds later the door slid open. Obi-Wan realized that the pause of the few seconds meant that they had just undergone some sort of security check. Was the shop-owner concerned about vandalism or theft? It was possible, since Eusebus was crowded with strangers.

But the security measures seemed excessive for a swoop seller. Obi-Wan stepped into the dim interior, fully aware that Didi could be leading him into his usual swamp of deception. Didi didn’t so much lie as leave crucial pieces of information out.

You owe me one, Qui-Gon.

## Jude Watson

“Good afternoon, good afternoon,” Didi said to a massive creature who suddenly loomed out of the shadows in the shop. The being was two meters taller than Obi-Wan. Each fifteen-fingered hand was the size of a bantha haunch.

There were six swoops parked in a random fashion around the open space. There were no other customers and no sign of business that Obi-Wan could see.

“You may remember me,” Didi said. “Didi Oddo. I was in yesterday.”

The massive creature said nothing, just watched Didi with flat eyes.

“Then again, you may not,” Didi said nervously. “This is my very good friend, the great Jedi Knight, Obi-Wan Kenobi. Obi-Wan, this is the swoop seller, Uso Yso.”

The creature did not shift his gaze from Didi’s face.

“Obviously you are a creature of action and I should get right to the point,” Didi said. “The swoop I bought yesterday...I have changed my mind.”

A flicker of alertness lit Uso Yso’s opaque gaze.

“I would like my money back,” Didi said, trying to sound forceful. “The swoop is not...not what I expected. No doubt I will return another day to buy a...different swoop, but not this one.”

Finally, Uso Yso spoke. “No.”

Didi took a delicate step backward. “One moment.”

He leaned back and whispered to Obi-Wan. “Can’t you draw your lightsaber or Jedi-move something? You don’t have to kill him.”

“No,” Obi-Wan said.

“A deal is a deal,” Uso Yso said, crossing his huge arms. “You are insulting me with your presence. I do not like to be insulted.”

“Ah, no insult intended. None at all,” Didi said rapidly. “Just a polite request. Surely there beats a heart underneath that...ah, magnificent physique.”

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

"Two hearts, actually," Uso Yso said. He withdrew an electro-jabber from his belt. "Would you like to continue the argument?"

Didi froze, staring at the weapon. He took another step back. "No argument. Just a thought. Such a pleasant afternoon. We must be going."

Didi almost ran from the shop. Obi-Wan followed. The door slid shut behind them, and Obi-Wan turned to Didi disgustedly.

"That was no swoop seller," he accused him.

"An unusual type, yes," Didi said. "Most helpful. Well, it's been such an unexpected pleasurable experience to see you, my friend, but I must be going—"

Obi-Wan stepped into his path. "Explain."

"Most happy to oblige, Obi-Wan," Didi said. "It is possible that the swoop seller might have an additional business."

"Ah," Obi-Wan said.

"Perhaps he sells swoops—I am sure he does, in fact, a few here and there—but that was not my business with him," Didi said evasively. His eyes darted about as if trying to find an escape route.

"Your business with him was?" Obi-Wan asked.

"A small bet," Didi said. He held up his hands as Obi-Wan glowered at him. "Such a tiny bet! On one of the events. Even the Jedi must realize that such an opportunity exists here on Euceron and there will be many who wish to place a wager."

"Certainly we realize that," Obi-Wan said. "It is also illegal. The Senate has banned gambling on the Galactic Games, and for good reason. It attracts criminals." He underlined the last word, giving Didi a sharp glance.

Didi nodded, frowning. "True. It would attract the wrong sort. Unlike me, who only places a bet now and again for the fun of it."

Obi-Wan sighed. "So why did you try to get your money back?"

## Jude Watson

"I was too impulsive," Didi confessed. "One of my faults, along with my generosity, that gets me into trouble. I made a wager and then my guilt overwhelmed me."

"Since when have you felt guilty about breaking the law?"

"I prefer to think I bend it, Obi-Wan. But that's not what caused my great guilt. It is because the credits I used were not mine."

"Whose were they?" Obi-Wan sensed he was nearing the real story at last.

"Bog and Astri's." Didi hung his head. "It was wrong. You cannot reproach me more than I have reproached myself. But they have a little wealth hidden away for some land Bog wishes to purchase, and this purchase will not be made for some time. The credits were just lying there! Such a waste. I assumed I could take the credits, make the bet, collect my winnings, and return the credits I borrowed without Astri knowing."

"And what if you lost?"

"I had such a sure tip, I did not think it possible."

Obi-Wan tapped a finger on his belt. Drawing information out of Didi was like trying to siphon water from sand. "If it is such a sure thing, why do you want your money back?"

"My guilt happened!" Didi said, his brown eyes wide. "I can't do that to Astri."

"And you also discovered that Bog and Astri would need the credits sooner than you thought," Obi-Wan guessed.

"Well, they happened to meet the owner of the land they want to buy here at the Games, and he is willing to sell at last..."

"So they will find the credits missing." Obi-Wan sighed. "There is only one thing to do. Confess what you've done to Astri. She will forgive you. She always does."

"Yes, doesn't she? That is a good idea, my friend. That is exactly what I will do."

Obi-Wan knew perfectly well that Didi would do nothing of the kind. "And do not involve me any further in your schemes,"

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

he said sternly. "You are on your own from now on. You cannot use the Jedi Order to threaten others."

"Not I!" Didi exclaimed in a hurt tone. "How can you say this, when I am the biggest supporter of Jedi in the galaxy? I did give you insider information, after all," he pointed out. "You now know the most important bookie at the Games."

"Am I supposed to thank you now?" Obi-Wan asked incredulously.

"No, no, of course not. Thanks is never what I want."

"Thanks are never what you deserve," Obi-Wan murmured.

"Ah, you joke." Didi smiled. "Then you are not angry with me. What a noble being you are, Obi-Wan Kenobi! How lucky I am to have you as a friend!"

"Not for much longer, if you try this again," Obi-Wan said. "Now I've wasted enough time. I must do my duty."

"Of course. Vastly more important than my humble problems. Do not worry about me. I will be fine," Didi said bravely.

Shaking his head, Obi-Wan left Didi, no doubt to concoct further schemes to get himself out of trouble. The gleam in Didi's eyes told him that.

Which reminded him of his Padawan. The gleam in Anakin's eyes had clearly told Obi-Wan that his Padawan would not be able to resist the lure of Podracing for long.

No doubt he was there now. After checking in with Siri and Ry-Gaul, Obi-Wan squeezed aboard a crowded Transit Red. By the time it reached the northern edge of the city he was the only one aboard. He jumped out and it turned around to speed back to the city. Obi-Wan stood in the center of a dusty road. Hills shimmered in the distance. He saw no sign of living beings.

He summoned the Force. As clearly as a directional laser, the Force told him where the cave entrance would be.

He struck off toward the hillside and climbed until he found a screen of thick green foliage. He pushed the bushes aside and

## Jude Watson

found the cave entrance. Obi-Wan hiked inside. The coolness of the air felt good on his warm skin.

He found the pit hangar easily. His Padawan stood over an engine, a hydrospanner in his hand. Obi-Wan came up behind him. Anakin was so absorbed that his usual sensitivity to his Master's presence was absent.

"It's got to be calibrated exactly right," Anakin was saying to two young Aleena mechanics standing nearby. "We might have to do it fifty times to get it right. Or we might get lucky and get it right in two."

"I hope it's the latter," Obi-Wan said. "Because there is a mission you should be attending to."

Anakin stood up so abruptly that he banged his head on the turbine. "Master! I didn't see you."

Obi-Wan examined the Podracer. "I see that you're busy."

"I thought I'd lend a hand to Doby and Deland. They're from Tatooine." Anakin looked uncomfortable. "If they win, they free their sister. She's a slave."

"I see." Obi-Wan nodded at the two brothers. "I wish you good luck. Anakin, may I speak with you a moment?"

He drew Anakin aside. "You know this is wrong," he told his Padawan with a frown. "I'm sure you are helping for the right reasons. But this is not our mission. We have more important things to do. And may I remind you that Podracing is illegal?"

"But the Ruling Power is looking the other way—"

"But the Games Council is concerned. As should you be. Once word gets out, spectators will arrive. This could turn into a dangerous situation. Do you know what the course will be?"

"Through the caves," Anakin said excitedly. "Can you imagine the difficulties? And they've already thought about the spectators. They're going to set up a viewing stand near the finish line."

"That doesn't mean that they will be safe." Obi-Wan's comlink signaled, and he answered it brusquely.

The unfamiliar voice was frantic with urgency. "There is an emergency—"



## **STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games**

“Who is this?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Bog. It’s Bog. You must come immediately. The Official Quarters.”

“What is wrong?”

“Come now!” Bog shouted, and the line went dead.

## Chapter Seven

“We need transport,” Obi-Wan said to Anakin.

Doby approached them. “We have an airspeeder,” he said. “You are welcome to borrow it for as long as you need it. Anakin has helped us with no thought for himself, and we wish to repay him however we can.”

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan said. Although he was irritated with Anakin for heading straight to the Podraces, he was always glad to see how Anakin’s generosity endeared him to others. Strangers became friends quickly for his Padawan.

Anakin connected to the Living Force as Qui-Gon had. He had that gift. What he needed to develop was Qui-Gon’s wisdom. That would only take time and missions.

*And mistakes.* He could hear Qui-Gon’s dry tone in his head.

The speeder was tweaked to run smoothly at high speeds, which Obi-Wan would expect from two Podracer owners. He sped back to the city core, Anakin at his side. He did not speculate on what was wrong. Whatever it was that had caused the panic in Bog’s voice, he would know soon enough. He hoped nothing had happened to Astri or Didi.

They passed through the high-security gate on the outskirts of the Games Quarters, where athletes and officials were housed. Obi-Wan was relieved when he arrived to see Astri and Didi

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

standing nearby as Bog talked earnestly to Siri and Ferus. Tru stood next to Ry-Gaul. Siri turned to greet him with a thinly disguised look of disgust on her face.

Obi-Wan leaped out of the speeder. "What happened?"

"Bog's speeder was stolen," Siri said. "He felt an alert to all Jedi teams was justified." Ry-Gaul sighed.

Obi-Wan gave Bog an exasperated glance. "You called in Jedi help because of a missing speeder?"

"You don't understand," Bog said. "The speeder was in a secure area. This is serious. I would think the Jedi would be concerned."

"There will always be petty crime at a large event like this one," Siri said. "Everyone should be careful with their personal property."

"Petty?" Bog flushed. "I don't call this petty."

"What Siri means is that this is really a case for the planet security," Obi-Wan said.

Bog flourished his comlink. "Really? Let's see what Liviani says when she arrives."

"You called Liviani?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Of course. As the head of the Council of the Games, I thought she would want to know," Bog said. "I must remind you that I am a member."

"I don't think you need to remind them," Astri said in a low tone. "You keep mentioning it."

A gleaming black airspeeder drew up, and Liviani slid out. "I received your message," she told Bog in a concerned tone. "Tell me again what happened and what exactly is missing."

Bog threw the Jedi a triumphant look. "The speeder was gone when Astri and I returned from the opening rituals," he said. "As I told you, some personal possessions were inside. My green cloak—the only one I brought for warmth—and a box of my favorite figda candy, as well as my datapad, my travel kit...and I am sure other important things."

## Jude Watson

"This is very bad," Liviani said. "I'm glad you contacted me." Obi-Wan was surprised at the concern in her tone. He had expected her to be as annoyed as they were. "Members of the Council for the Games deserve the highest consideration." She turned to the Jedi. "You must investigate this at once."

Siri looked startled. "Investigate a speeder theft? It's a waste of our time."

Siri was never one to hide her feelings. "Surely there are better uses for our time," Obi-Wan said in a more conciliatory tone.

"I don't think so," Liviani said flatly. "Begin at once."

"We don't take orders from you," Siri said. Her face was calm but two bright red spots appeared on her cheeks. "We are here at the Ruling Power's request."

"Then I shall contact the Ruling Power," Liviani snapped, reaching for her comlink. "All I have to do is contact Maxo Vista. He will go to them at once, and they will order you."

"No one orders the Jedi." Ry-Gaul spoke at last. His soft voice was measured, but with a core of strength that made everyone stop and look at him. "We accept requests. Then we decide."

Liviani struggled to control her irritation. It was clear that Ry-Gaul's authoritative tone had made her realize it was time to back down. "Of course," she said through tight lips. She shoved her comlink back into her cloak pocket. "Then I request that this be investigated." She spoke in a more conciliatory tone. "Think about it. This area is under top security. Yet a thief entered and stole a valuable item. The athletes and workers are under my care."

Obi-Wan nodded shortly. "In that case, we accept your request. One Jedi team will investigate."

Liviani swept off in a swirl of robes and scarves. Siri drew closer to Obi-Wan.

"I still say this is a waste of time," she said. "Who knows how long it will take to investigate a theft?"

## **STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games**

“I do,” Obi-Wan said. “It will take exactly ten seconds.” Then he looked hard at Didi, who coughed and looked away.

## Chapter Eight

Anakin saw his Master signal to Didi. Didi tried to ignore the signal, but Obi-Wan strode over. Anakin followed curiously.

Obi-Wan drew Didi aside. "You'd better start talking fast," he said. "And no excuses. No diversions. Just the truth."

"I didn't steal it, I borrowed it," Didi said.

Didi had stolen his own son-in-law's speeder? Anakin couldn't believe it.

"I was going to return it," Didi said quickly, as he noted the thunderous expression on Obi-Wan's face.

"The same way you were going to return the credits?"

"Ah, you see!" Didi cried triumphantly. "My point exactly! How could I return the credits if I didn't steal the speeder?"

"Explain your logic," Obi-Wan said. "Nobody else can follow it."

"I was going to take your excellent advice and confess everything to Astri," Didi said. "I was on my way to find her and I saw the speeder. I began to reflect on the amount of credits I had borrowed, and the fact that if Bog found out he would no doubt banish me to wander the galaxy friendless and alone. So I thought it best to return the credits without his ever finding out."

"So you stole his speeder."

"*Borrowed*. But only so I could repay the credits! You see?"

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

“Well,” Obi-Wan said, “you’re just going to have to return it.”

“Ah,” Didi said. “Another excellent suggestion. Except it’s too late. I’ve sold the speeder.”

“At least then you can give them the credits,” Obi-Wan said with a sigh.

“But I can’t! I have to place another bet!”

Obi-Wan turned away. “Fine. I’m no longer involved. I’m telling Bog who stole the speeder, and you can explain it any way you want.”

“Wait!” Didi screeched hurriedly. “My good friend, Obi-Wan! You don’t understand! I will return the speeder most definitely! My bet is a sure thing.”

“No bet is a sure thing, Didi,” Obi-Wan said. “When are you going to learn that?”

“But this one is! I promise!”

Obi-Wan paused. Anakin watched his face. He had expected his Master to walk away, but something Didi said had stopped him. It seemed a minor problem to Anakin. Why was Obi-Wan getting involved?

“How do you know the bet is a sure thing?” Obi-Wan asked.

Didi looked uncomfortable under Obi-Wan’s scrutiny. “Well. You might say I have a tip.”

“What kind of tip?” Obi-Wan frowned.

“A tip that an event is fixed,” Didi admitted. “From a source I trust.”

“Who?” Obi-Wan demanded.

“Someone you know,” Didi said. “Fligh.”

Obi-Wan groaned. “Not Fligh. Is he on Euceron?”

“Of course,” Didi said. “Isn’t everyone? And you can’t beat Fligh’s information. If there’s a nasty, secret bit of business, you can bet Fligh knows about it. So how could I ignore his advice? The swoop obstacle race is fixed and I know the winner. If you’d let me make the bet, everything will be fine. My problems will be solved, and I know how much you want this.”

“Wait here,” Obi-Wan told him sternly.

## Jude Watson

He drew Anakin aside. "I think we should pursue this," he said. "If some of the events are fixed, it could cause major trouble. It could be a serious disruption of the peace."

We're wasting time on this. I could be with the Podracers. I could be helping Doby and Deland. They are trying to free their sister. Didi is trying to win a bet. Which is more important?

Anakin hid his disappointment with a frown. "Who is Fligh? Do you trust him?"

"Trust him?" Obi-Wan grimaced. "Not at all. But if he's heard something, we could have problems even if his information is false. Fligh hangs around the Senate. He knows everyone and passes along information for credits. If he's heard an event is fixed, he isn't the only one who thinks this." He sighed. "As much as I'd like to walk away from this, I'm afraid we'll have to investigate." Obi-Wan gave Anakin a careful look. "What is wrong, Padawan?"

"It seems...a waste of time to me," Anakin said, reluctant to contradict his Master. "We are here as peacekeepers. There is a better use of Jedi time." He did not mention Doby and Deland, but he knew his Master would know what he was not saying.

Obi-Wan nodded as if considering Anakin's opinion. "What do you think would be a better use of our time?"

Anakin looked down and said nothing.

"Tell me," Obi-Wan continued, "what do you think would happen if it was discovered that some of the events are fixed?"

Anakin shrugged. "Some will be upset. Especially those who have placed illegal bets."

"What about the planets involved? If it appears that some have cheated, or conspired to defraud the Games, how will other worlds react? Each world sends the very best of its athletes to compete in the Games. These beings are often great heroes on their home-worlds. What if they are denied their victories because an event is fixed?"

"I guess it could create some unrest," Anakin said, after a pause.



## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

“Yes, young Padawan,” Obi-Wan said. “Hundreds of thousands of beings are crammed into one city. All have come to cheer their heroes or their future heroes. It may not seem an important lead for us to follow, but missions don’t always start out with a battle. Sometimes they begin with something insignificant. Something unimportant. Part of being a Jedi is to recognize the small thing that can change everything.”

“If it is so small, how can we recognize it?”

“We take ourselves out of what we are looking at,” Obi-Wan answered.

Anakin scowled. “I don’t understand.”

Obi-Wan put his hand on Anakin’s shoulder. “I know. That is why you are still a Padawan. Someday you will.”

## Chapter Nine

Obi-Wan didn't blame Anakin for his puzzlement. Didi's bet didn't appear to be worth Jedi investigation. But instinct was ticking inside Obi-Wan, telling him that this was something to pursue. He had learned not to ignore that small voice. Qui-Gon had taught him that. If he could teach Anakin one thing, it would be to slow down enough to hear that insistent sound, sometimes no more than a whisper, that said, *follow this*.

Didi nervously scuttled through the crowded streets, his eyes alert for the security force he was sure would be pursuing him soon. "It occurs to me that Fligh might not be too pleased to hear that I have involved the Jedi," he said. "Perhaps it would be better if you went on alone."

"No, it wouldn't," Obi-Wan answered firmly.

Didi stopped and turned. "Do not take this wrong. I am honored and blessed with your presence. But being friends with you is not easy, Obi-Wan."

"I know."

Didi turned into a crowded open-air plaza. Fountains played in the center, each one displaying the colors of a different world and changing in the next instant to another, so that the sparkling water seemed to glow with a thousand colors at once. Trees and bushes from planets around the galaxy had been placed in huge

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

stone urns that offered shade for the chairs and tables set up underneath. A large screen flashed the opening times of various events, as well as the best routes to get to them. Other smaller screens showed events taking place in the various stadiums. Beings from around the galaxy sat watching the screens, sipping juice or tea, eating sweets, and watching children play in the multicolored fountains. A four-piece band played soft jazz-wail music.

Obi-Wan's glance swept the plaza. Although he had not seen Fligh in many years, he recognized him immediately. He sat with his back to a wall snaked with blooming vines, tapping one long foot to the music. He sipped from a glass of bright yellow juice. He was as thin and spidery as ever, and his long ears appeared even longer, the lobes resting on his shoulders. A tuft of graying yellow hair sprouted from his balding head. Several gold rings were stacked on his long fingers. As they came closer, Obi-Wan saw that Fligh had replaced his pride and joy—his fake green eye—with a bright gold one.

Obi-Wan had first met Fligh when he was Qui-Gon's Padawan. Fligh had sworn to help his best friend Didi even as he squirmed out of telling the truth to the Jedi and faked his own death. Getting the whole truth out of Fligh wouldn't be easy.

His pleasant expression darkened with apprehension when he saw the Jedi, but he quickly turned it into a welcoming smile. "Didi! Old friend! Such a surprise to see you on Euceron! Though everyone who is anyone is here, so there you go, not such a surprise after all."

"Do you remember Obi-Wan Kenobi, the great Jedi Knight?"

"Ah, but he was just a Learner when I knew him," Fligh said. "Obi-Wan, what a fortunate meeting! It is my luck to be able to renew our great friendship."

"We were never friends," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"We weren't, it's true, and that is a pity," Fligh agreed sadly. "But now we have a second chance. I see that now you have a Padawan Learner yourself."

## Jude Watson

"I am Anakin Skywalker," Anakin said.

Fligh turned to examine him curiously with his good eye. "I have heard about you."

Anakin looked defensive. "What have you heard?"

"Whoa-hoa, relax, young friend," Fligh said. "It was all good things, I assure you. Yes, promising Jedi, amazing talents, there you go."

"Didi tells us you have some information about some of the events at the Games," Obi-Wan said.

Fligh narrowed his eye at Didi. "Do I? I hear things, but nothing important enough to involve the Jedi."

"That is not what Didi said." Obi-Wan stood casually, as though he had all the time in the world, but he was prepared to pressure Fligh. He was impatient to get to the bottom of this. He didn't want to waste more of the day.

"All right, all right," Didi said when Fligh shot him another look. "I told him. But he's a Jedi, Fligh. You can't lie to a Jedi."

"I don't see why not," Fligh shot back, too angry to watch his words. "They're no different from anybody else."

"Oh, yes," Anakin said stridently. "We are."

Fligh's head whipped around, his ears taking a moment to catch up. They bobbed gently and came to rest on his shoulders. His gaze flicked to the lightsabers tucked into Obi-Wan's and Anakin's belts. "Errrrr, you do have a point. There you go. I concede it. In that case—and considering our deep friendship which I cherish despite your refusal to acknowledge it—I will tell you what I know. I heard a rumor that one of the events was fixed. I told Didi about it. After all, why shouldn't my friend benefit?" He gave Didi a hard stare. "If I'd known that friend had such a big mouth, I might have reconsidered."

"Are you involved in this?" Obi-Wan asked him. "Do you know who fixed the obstacle race, and how?"

"I know nothing except this—the participant from Alderaan will win."

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

Obi-Wan frowned. How could a swoop obstacle race—a series of timed individual races against the clock—be fixed? “How do you know?”

“I don’t have to tell you that,” Fligh said defiantly.

“That’s true,” Obi-Wan said. “But you will have to tell the security force for the Ruling Power.”

Fligh broke into a smile. “No need for that! I’d much rather share with friends! I was told by Quentor. A being very much like me, who does similar work.”

“Another thief?”

“Another businessman like myself, who buys and sells information and the occasional valuable item that might find its way into our hands. Quentor would not tell me how he knew, but he swore the information was true, and I believed him. A clever one, that Quentor. He would not steer you wrong. He swore that there is an insider at the Games who has arranged to fix an event. A good way to make a quick fortune, isn’t it? I thought it was a rumor worth a few gambling credits for myself and my friend.”

Obi-Wan considered this. Fligh was calling it a rumor, but he had told Didi to bet and no doubt had placed a bet himself. But that didn’t necessarily mean the rumor was true. Didi had placed plenty of bad bets, some of them on Fligh’s advice.

Fligh saw Obi-Wan’s hesitation. “You might want to place a bet yourself, my friend. Even the Jedi can use wealth. You could stop hitching rides and have your own transports, maybe invest in some new robes—”

Obi-Wan turned and searched the event board. “The event is starting soon.”

“Yes, unfortunately too late for you to do anything about it,” Fligh said. “So sorry. There you go.”

“Stadium Five. It’s not far,” Obi-Wan said. “Come on, Anakin. You too, Didi.”

## Jude Watson

“Not me, surely,” Didi said. “I need to visit with my old friend—ooooooooohhh!” Obi-Wan had grabbed his collar and yanked him into step next to the Jedi.

“We can make it,” Obi-Wan said. “We have four minutes.”

They hurried from the plaza. The streets had emptied as various events had begun. Obi-Wan and Anakin quickened their pace, so Didi had a hard time keeping up. Obi-Wan was reluctant to let him go. There was no way to keep track of Fligh, but they could at least keep hold of Didi, their tie to Fligh.

“There’s an air taxi!” Didi called, breathing hard. “I beg you, Obi-Wan, take it!”

Obi-Wan signaled and the air taxi zoomed to a stop. It was empty except for the pilot.

“The swoop obstacle course event, Stadium Five,” Obi-Wan said.

The pilot nodded without turning and glided back into the air lane. Obi-Wan settled back into a seat next to Anakin.

“What will we do when we get there?” Anakin asked him in a low tone.

“I’m not sure yet,” Obi-Wan said. “We can’t say for sure the event is fixed. We can’t make that accusation without more proof.”

The ship’s velocity pushed him back against the seat. Buildings were a blur of bright color as they flashed by.

“Isn’t he going a trifle fast?” Didi asked, pressing his hands together.

“Master, I feel a disturbance in the Force,” Anakin murmured.

Obi-Wan had been startled by the same feeling. He rose and started toward the pilot, but the cruiser jerked violently to the left, almost throwing him to the floor. He grabbed a pole and righted himself, then started toward the pilot again. The ship veered to the right, grazing a sign. Metal shrieked and the cruiser lurched again. Didi fell off his seat with a yelp.

Obi-Wan fought his way to the front of the taxi as the ship careened down the road, clipping branches, signs, and narrowly

## **STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games**

missing buildings. Then the pilot reversed the engines and zoomed down another spacelane...the wrong way.

Cruisers were heading straight for them. The pilot pushed the speed to maximum and jumped to his feet. He balanced for a moment on the lip of the air taxi, then calmly leaped into the air. He was wearing an antigrav propulsion belt, so he dropped quickly but safely to the ground, leaving them in a runaway cruiser screaming the wrong way down an air lane.

“We’re going to die!” Didi screamed.

## Chapter Ten

Anakin vaulted over the rows of seats and landed in the pilot's chair, his hands already outstretched for the controls. In midair, he had seen precisely what he needed to do.

A less-experienced pilot would have immediately reduced speed. Anakin knew better. He needed the speed to avoid the collision. Instead of slowing, he made a hard right. The cruiser passed them by, so close Anakin could see the fearful gaze of the pilot, who did not have the time or reflexes to alter his course.

The air taxi was slower and clumsier than a Podracer, but Anakin felt the familiar thrill of pushing a machine to its limits as he negotiated tight spaces at high speeds.

As soon as they were past the cruiser, Anakin reduced speed while turning to the left. He had just enough speed to avoid the next collision. Then he kept the air taxi turning until they were facing in the correct direction. Anakin calmly joined the stream of traffic.

Didi spoke from the floor, his head in his hands. "Are we dead yet?"

"Good piloting, Padawan." Obi-Wan sank into a seat behind Anakin. "That was close."



## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

Didi rose shakily to his feet. "What kind of a pilot tries to crash an air taxi and then jumps off? I've had some bad air-taxi drivers, but..." He looked at the Jedi. "No. No, no."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "It was deliberate. We were definitely targeted. Most likely by Fligh."

Didi shook his head. "Not Fligh. He's my friend."

"Well, your *friend* told someone we were on our way to the stadium," Anakin said. "That empty air taxi didn't show up by accident."

Warning lights suddenly flashed behind them and a voice boomed. "Pull over. Ruling Power security. Repeat. Pull over."

"You'd better do it," Obi-Wan told Anakin. "We're going to have to explain this."

"Security!" Didi exclaimed. "You don't need me, do you, Obi-Wan? I can go to the stadium and report to you what goes on—"

"If I hear you placed a bet, you will regret it," Obi-Wan warned him.

"No bets!" Didi stood by the door, waiting for Anakin to slow enough for him to jump off. "Promise!"

Anakin slowed the craft, and Didi leaped off and disappeared into the crowd as the security officers exited their Flash Speeder and approached the Jedi.

The security officer was dressed completely in black. He flipped up the visor of his shiny helmet.

"We received reports of a runaway air taxi endangering traffic."

"We are Jedi," Obi-Wan said. "The pilot exited and disappeared, and we got the taxi under control."

The officer studied them for a moment, then entered the information into his palm-sized datapad. "Description?"

Obi-Wan gave his estimates of height and weight. "He was dressed in the regulation air-taxi pilot uniform," he said. "He had a reflective visor on his helmet, so his features were obscured, but he appeared to be a humanoid. Left earlobe slightly larger

## Jude Watson

than the right. A tear on the third knuckle of his right glove. He was right-handed.”

“One boot had a two-centimeter slash in the leather near the instep,” Anakin supplied. “Dark matter on the right glove.”

“Possibly blood, but there was no evidence of injury, so we could assume it was from another being,” Obi-Wan interjected. “Sour smell indicates he had recently exerted himself. Perhaps from the battle to commandeer the air taxi. You’ll probably find an injured air-taxi pilot.”

“We already have. He gave a description. He said the guy was tall.” The officer tucked the datapad into his belt. “Never believed that stuff about Jedi. Now I do. Larger left earlobe, huh?” He shook his head. “It’s good information, but the city is packed. We might not find him. You can proceed.”

Stadium Five was now only steps away. Obi-Wan and Anakin hurried through the tall arches and into the open-air arena. Their ears rang with the noise of a roaring crowd. The race had already begun.

Didi had entered the same way and was waiting for them by the refreshment stand while watching the race on a monitor. Obi-Wan saw that the large circular track was made up of many levels, from the floor of the arena to the top. Each level had a series of holographic obstacles for the swoops to avoid or evade, such as trees, creatures, and traffic officers. He hurried over. “Did they ask about Bog’s speeder?”

“No, they were only interested in the air taxi,” Obi-Wan said. “Has anything odd happened?”

“Nothing that I can see. All the swoops are performing well. The Alderaan pilot is in the lead.” Didi wrung his hands. “And to think I could have bet on him!”

Obi-Wan strode toward a viewing platform. The noise of the crowd reverberated off the walls of the stadium and caused the air to ring against his ears. He was high above the race below. The agile swoops, wearing different planetary colors, zoomed

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

around holographic obstacles that suddenly appeared in their paths. The crowd roared approval or fury at the spectacle.

Obi-Wan watched carefully. The swoops seemed to be functioning perfectly. The pilots were battling with every ounce of concentration they possessed.

"It has to be the timers," he murmured to Anakin. "Someone must have tampered with them. Only a hundredth of a second off, and the race will be won."

"Are the timers controlled by one person?" Anakin asked.

"I don't know," Obi-Wan said. "But we can find out."

The race ended with the Alderaan pilot zooming past the finish line to cheers and boos. Beside Obi-Wan, Didi groaned.

"There goes my fortune," he said.

A viewing platform glided into the center of the stadium. A tall, handsome Euceron male held a flashing hologram embedded in crystal over his head. It was the first-place award. The crowd went wild.

"It's Maxo Vista," Didi breathed in tones of awe.

Anakin peered across the distance. "He's older than I thought."

"He is magnificent," Didi said.

"Didi, I want you to do something for me," Obi-Wan said, turning his back on the award ceremony. "First of all, stay out of trouble. Second, stick close to Fligh. I might need to talk to him again."

"All right, Obi-Wan. I will do what you say. My fate is intertwined with your desires," Didi said, his sad eyes still on the ceremony.

"Let us go, Padawan," Obi-Wan said. "I'd like to have a word with the timekeeper for this event."

On the way to the exclusive VIP skybox on Level Twenty where the Games Council members and other officials sat, Obi-Wan contacted the keeper of the Archives, Jocasta Nu, at the Temple.

## Jude Watson

"Can you do a quick search for me on a being named Quentor? Your basic operator who hangs around the Senate. He trades in information and stolen goods."

"What do you need to know?" Jocasta Nu asked.

"I'm not sure. His whereabouts, for one thing. Any ties he might have to the Ruling Power of Euceron or the Galactic Games."

As he spoke, Obi-Wan stepped inside the Council skybox. In the first row of the box, Maxo Vista was talking to a tall Euceron dressed in a long white robe. Obi-Wan assumed the Euceron was a Ruler, but he didn't know which one. He hung back for a moment.

"Can we meet him? Can we meet Maxo Vista?" Anakin whispered, close by his side. He had heard stories of how Vista performed in the last Games.

"Maxo Vista?" Jocasta Nu asked, overhearing Anakin. Her voice lost its businesslike quality. Obi-Wan had never heard her sound so warm. "Have you met him?"

"No," Obi-Wan said.

"You don't know who he is, do you?" Jocasta Nu demanded.

"Can you retrieve that information for me?" Obi-Wan asked irritably.

"Yes, Obi-Wan. I'll do what I can." Jocasta Nu's voice brimmed with humor, an unusual occurrence.

Maxo Vista caught sight of them and came forward with the tall Euceron. "I have hoped to meet the Jedi," he said. "This is Ruler Three, one of the esteemed Ruling Power."

Obi-Wan introduced himself and Anakin. Maxo Vista flashed a charismatic smile, his vivid green eyes shining. "We are grateful that the Jedi have graciously agreed to attend the Games. With so many worlds coming together for these Games, it holds out a promise for peace throughout the galaxy."

Ruler Three bowed. "Our government thanks you. Now I must attend the next event."

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

As soon as Ruler Three had left, Obi-Wan turned back to Maxo Vista. “We would like to speak with the official timekeeper for this event.”

“Of course.” Maxo leaned forward to touch a glowing screen. “That would be Aarno Dering.” He peered over at a glass skybox with an excellent view of the action. “He’s already left, I’m afraid. But I can give you his room number at the official Games quarters.”

“We’d appreciate it.”

Maxo Vista hesitated. “Is anything wrong?”

“Just a routine check,” Obi-Wan assured him.

He nodded and consulted the screen again, then gave them Aarno Dering’s location. Obi-Wan and Anakin hurried out of Stadium Five. The air taxis were full of the departing crowd. Obi-Wan and Anakin threaded through the crowd, moving quickly and easily through the crush.

“I can’t believe I actually met Maxo Vista,” Anakin said. “I’ll never forget his performance in the swoop races in the last Games. And did you see him in the holographic obstacle course? He set a new galactic record.” Obi-Wan’s face was blank, and Anakin sighed. “I can’t believe you don’t know who he is. Everybody—”

“—knows Maxo Vista,” Obi-Wan finished. “But right now I’m more interested in Aarno Dering.”

At the quarters, they passed the security checkpoint and quickly accessed a map for directions to Block Seven, Room 4116.

“This way,” Obi-Wan said.

They hurried down the outdoor walkways that connected the various temporary buildings built of hard duraplastoid materials in bright colors. When they reached Block Seven, they took a moving walkway up to the fourth story.

“Room 4116 should be at the end of the walkway,” Anakin said.

## **Jude Watson**

A tall humanoid male came out of a door at the end of the walkway. He paused while he carefully placed various personal items in different-sized pockets. His neutral gaze slid over the surrounding area and lit on the Jedi.

He jumped and a look of surprised panic lit his eyes. He turned abruptly and headed the other way.

“Aarno Dering?” Obi-Wan called, quickening his pace. “We’d like to talk to you.”

Dering began to run. Obi-Wan and Anakin leaped forward in a surge of speed.

Dering had a good head start, but he was no athlete. He leaped onto the moving walkway and zigzagged past athletes and workers, pushing some aside roughly. Obi-Wan leaped off the second story and landed lightly on the ground. Anakin followed.

When Dering raced out an exit from the quarters and into the street, Obi-Wan was merely steps away. Suddenly, a fast-moving airspeeder headed straight for Dering. Obi-Wan reached out, ready to grab the waving hem of the man’s tunic, but the speeder struck the slight man first, sending him flying through the air. Aarno Dering landed with a sickening thud.

## Chapter Eleven

“Go to him,” Obi-Wan ordered Anakin tersely.

Obi-Wan jumped after the speeder. Landing on the speeder’s outrigger component, Obi-Wan drew his lightsaber and severed it with one stroke. The speeder veered and crashed into a bright yellow bench, and the pilot leaped out. Obi-Wan recognized him instantly as the pilot of the air taxi. Something about the way he held his body alerted him. His movements were quick and powerful, but loose and graceful as well.

The pilot leaped over the speeder and raced down the street. Without breaking stride, he shot a cable launcher up to the roof of a high building. The cable launcher pulled him up and he disappeared onto the roof.

Obi-Wan activated his own launcher and followed, the wind rushing past his ears. He jumped onto the roof just as the pilot leaped to the next building. Obi-Wan followed.

The pilot never looked back. Obi-Wan noted his coolness. There were not many, being pursued, who did not pause to check on the location of their pursuer. Obi-Wan was gaining and the pilot seemed to know it, for his pace quickened as he leaped to the next roof. It was twenty meters below, but he landed easily and kept on running. Obi-Wan summoned the Force for his jump and landed.

## Jude Watson

The pilot raced to the edge of the roof that overlooked the street. Obi-Wan could hear the noise of a crowd and as he drew closer he saw that a stadium below was emptying. Air taxis were lined up awaiting passengers. The pilot paused and activated his anti-grav propulsion belt. It allowed him to drop off the roof and land safely on the walkway below.

Obi-Wan leaped down and had to swerve at the last moment to avoid a child who suddenly darted out from between her mother and father. He landed hard. He was just in time to see the pilot get swallowed up by the surging crowd.

Irritation flamed and died away. He would have liked to have caught the pilot. It did not happen. On to the next.

He made his way back to the quarters. Anakin knelt by Aarno Dering, his hand on the man's shoulder. Obi-Wan knew immediately that he was dead.

He walked to Anakin and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. They stood for a moment, a linked chain of commemoration. A Jedi always paused to reflect on a life lost, even if they did not know the spirit who had left.

"There was nothing I could do." Anakin's face was pale. He had seen death before, but he was still affected by it. Obi-Wan was glad to see this. He hoped Anakin would never lose that particular vulnerability. There had been a time when he had wondered if Anakin failed to connect, a time when he had seen a curious blankness on the boy's face after he had killed in battle. Since that time, Obi-Wan had watched Anakin carefully. When he saw his Padawan feel the enormity of a life lost, he was reassured.

A security speeder pulled up, its signal lights flashing. Close behind was the sleek black airspeeder of Liviani Sarno. When she jumped out, it was clear she was livid.

"First an air-taxi driver is badly beaten, and now this," she snapped, standing over the body of Aarno Dering. "How will you explain this to the Council?"



## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

Anakin flushed with anger, and Obi-Wan's hand tightened on his shoulder. Liviani Sarno's words had offended Obi-Wan as well. She treated the death of a fellow being as a nasty inconvenience.

"Obviously the Jedi cannot fulfill their promises," Liviani continued.

"The Jedi promised nothing except our presence," Obi-Wan said.

Her lips pressed together. "In that case, I am calling for extra security."

"That is a good idea," Obi-Wan answered. He was nettled at her tone, but extra security was not a bad idea. He didn't want to reveal his suspicions to Liviani yet. Officials had a tendency to get in the way. Obi-Wan wanted to make sure of what he was dealing with first.

Liviani turned to confer with a security officer. "I suggest you find an event to attend," she said over her shoulder to the Jedi. "Just stand around and do nothing. If you can manage that much."

Obi-Wan strode away. Anakin let out a long breath.

"I have more things to learn about patience," he said. "I don't know how you keep your temper sometimes, Master."

"Indulging momentary irritation is nothing more than a distraction," Obi-Wan answered. "Liviani is worried that if disruptions occur it will reflect badly on her. We have more important things to do. When Aarno Dering left his room, did you notice anything significant?"

He watched as his Padawan frowned, thinking. Then Anakin's face brightened.

"He was just sliding his datapad into his tunic with his left hand. He dropped it when he saw us. It fell in the doorway and the door did not shut."

"Exactly," Obi-Wan said. "I think we might want to take a peek into the life of Aarno Dering."

## Jude Watson

They passed through the security gate again and quickly made their way to Dering's room. It was only a matter of time before the security officers arrived. Obi-Wan wasn't sure how cooperative they would be with the Jedi.

The datapad lay in the doorway. Obi-Wan handed it to Anakin and reached down for a small folder that had been dropped as well. In it was a text doc ID for someone named Ak Duranc.

"It's a false text doc for Aarno Dering," he told Anakin. "Often new identities use the same initials as the being's real name. It helps them to remember their new identity."

"But what does it mean?" Anakin asked. "Why would Dering want a new identity?"

"There's only one reason," Obi-Wan said. "He was afraid he would get caught. The question is why." He tapped the text doc thoughtfully against his leg. "Beings don't go to this much trouble without cause. He was afraid. But of what?"

Obi-Wan surveyed the room. It was small and neat. Everything was put away. A closed travel pack sat on a table. Two chronos sat by the sleep couch. Obi-Wan picked them up.

"They are set to wake him up," he said. "He used two so that he would not oversleep." He placed them back where he'd found them. "Interesting. A chrono expert who does not trust chronos."

"Master, look at this." Anakin bent over a holofile. "He didn't code any of his files."

"He was worried enough to get a new identity, but he didn't have time to code his files," Obi-Wan mused. "That meant he was once confident that he wouldn't get caught."

"He's noted the events that he's set up the timing system for. The bowcaster skill contest and holographic obstacle course are the only ones left. But Master..." Anakin looked up. "The Podrace is here, too."

Obi-Wan came over and studied the file. "So. Whoever is behind fixing the games could be fixing the Podrace, too."

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

Anakin tapped the datapad. "This means that Doby and Deland don't stand a chance. The winner has already been chosen."

"Possibly. We don't know anything for sure yet."

"What I don't understand is how a Podrace can be fixed," Anakin continued. "It's not like an obstacle swoop race, where individual segments are timed. Whoever crosses the finish line first wins. You can't guarantee that someone won't crack up or crash. I wouldn't take the bet, even if someone told me the race was fixed."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I see what you mean. But it can't be a coincidence that the corrupt timing judge has agreed to time the race." He stared at the neat belongings of Aarno Dering while he considered their next step. He knew it was inevitable, but he didn't like it. He would have to send Anakin back to the Podracers.

"This could be a larger-scale operation than I thought," he said aloud. "No doubt Fligh didn't tell us everything. And no doubt there are parts to this that even Fligh doesn't know. I will contact Siri and Ry-Gaul to see if they have discovered anything. Anakin, you must go back to the Podracers." Obi-Wan did not like the way Anakin's face brightened at this. "You have made friends with Doby and Deland. See if they know how the race could be fixed and if there is heavy betting going on."

"And what will you do, Master?"

"I'm going to work from the opposite end. If we want to find out who is fixing the events, we have to find out who benefits. That means that someone, or a group of beings, are placing bets on the outcome."

"But how can you discover who that is?"

"I have to reacquaint myself with Uso Yso."

## Chapter Twelve

Anakin piloted Doby and Deland's speeder back to the Podrace hangar, leaving Obi-Wan as he checked in with Siri and Ry-Gaul to see if other complications had sprung up. Anakin was glad that the investigation had allowed him to return. He already felt that Doby and Deland were friends. He'd made a promise to them, and he intended to keep it. The best part was that he could do this and still follow Obi-Wan's instructions. Working on their Podracer would be the perfect cover for him to keep his eyes and ears open.

But if he were honest with himself, Anakin had to admit that it wasn't just his promise and the mission that drove him back to the Podracer. It was how good it felt to be here. Here he did not have to worry if he was good enough. He did not need to question himself. All he had to do was make something go very, very fast.

He saw Doby and Deland working on the engine as he parked the speeder and hurried over. Deland raised a grease-stained face. "Am I glad to see you! We have a rotor problem we can't seem to fix."

"Let me have a look." Anakin leaned over the engine. "This could be a connector problem. Let me take a look at the valves. Hand me that hydrospanner, will you?"

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

Anakin took the hydrospanner from Doby and bent over the engine. "Have you run the track in a speeder yet?" he asked. "An advance look is always a good idea." The more information he got about the race, the easier it would be to figure out how it was fixed.

"Can't," Doby said. "The Podracers won't know the track until they're racing."

Anakin looked up. "What do you mean?"

"The onboard nav computer will flash us the next area of the track every three minutes," Deland explained. "We have to race and navigate at the same time. It's a new innovation that Sebulba dreamed up."

"He knows Hekula can do it, with his reflexes," Doby said. "Plus they have such a maneuverable Podracer. The rest of us have had to reconfigure a bit, but it sure does make the race more exciting."

Anakin tinkered with the valves. Could this be the key to how the race was fixed? What if Sebulba's Podracer got the track information before anyone else? That would definitely give Hekula an edge.

"Who sends the route to the onboard computers?" he asked.

"The official timekeeper set up the program," Doby said. "Don't know his name."

But I do. It's Aarno Dering. And Aarno Dering is dead. Someone else will have to run the program. But who?

"Who's the favorite?" Anakin asked. "How are the odds running?"

"Ten to one for Hekula," Deland said. "Rumor has it that Sebulba has bet a fortune on his son."

Of course he has. He knows Hekula will win.

Anakin glanced over the hood of the Podracer to where Sebulba was sitting, sipping tea while the pit droids worked on Hekula's Podracer. Sebulba looked over and met his eyes. Something happened behind the creature's bulging eyes. Memory clicked in.

## Jude Watson

He rose, his front arms waving, and approached. “Now I recognize you, slave boy. All you needed was a little grease on your face.” He laughed. “What an unfortunate surprise. I thought you were dead.”

“Not yet, Sebulba,” Anakin shot back. “I’m here to make sure your son loses the way you did back on Tatooine. Badly.”

“Luck was on your side that day, slave boy,” Sebulba hissed. “You are just a human, slow and clumsy as a bantha. I should have killed you then.”

“You tried,” Anakin said coolly. “But you failed. Failure seems to be your destiny.”

“Insolent boy!” Sebulba hissed, raising his hand for a blow. Anakin had no doubt that his blow would still be powerful enough to send him flying.

But he was a Jedi now. Sebulba’s arm moved so fast it was a blur, but to Anakin it looked like slow-motion. He easily stepped aside in time. The wind fanned against his face. Sebulba staggered, his balance upset. He had expected to land the punch.

“You can’t touch me,” Anakin said. He whispered the words, close enough now to smell Sebulba’s rank scent. “You were never fast enough. You still aren’t.”

“Slave boy!” Sebulba went toward him again. This time Anakin whirled and delivered a kick that sent Sebulba flying.

Enraged, Sebulba started toward a waiting Anakin, but suddenly the Glymphid Aldar Beedo stepped between them.

“You’re disturbing my concentration,” he said to Anakin, tapping a blaster on his belt.

“He’s a Jedi,” Doby whispered. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“All beings are the same once they’re dead,” Beedo said, his eyes cool.

Anakin hesitated, not sure what to do. The situation now threatened to spiral out of control. Hekula was starting across to join in. If a fight began, others could be hurt, including Doby and Deland.

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

“Master!” Suddenly Djulla appeared and tugged at Sebulba’s robe. “I have made fresh tea.”

“So what?” Sebulba said furiously. “Get away from me, slave!”

He struggled to kick Djulla aside with his hind legs while keeping his eyes on Anakin. Deland jumped forward to protect his sister. Sebulba’s kick connected and Deland flew through the air, smashing against the cliff face. He landed awkwardly on his arm with a cry.

“Deland!” Djulla ran toward her brother. She knelt beside him. “You’re hurt!”

“Get away from him!” Hekula suddenly roared, rushing forward. “You take orders from us! Get back to your post!”

Djulla hesitated. Aldar Beedo shrugged and turned away, tucking his blaster back into his belt. “This is a family matter,” he said. “I have work to do.”

Deland’s teeth gritted. “Go back,” he told his sister. “I am all right.”

Hekula turned to Anakin. “If you keep insisting on making trouble, you’ll be sorry.”

Anakin trembled with the effort of holding himself back. He thought of Obi-Wan’s coolness. He could not feel it, but he could imitate it. It was better to let this particular moment pass. He was not a slave boy, he was a Jedi. He could not pick a fight because two bullies deserved to be humiliated.

Djulla hurried away. Doby helped his brother to his feet. Deland held his arm carefully.

“Better get the medic, boy!” Sebulba called before scuttling back to his Podracer. “It looks like you won’t be able to pilot your Podracer.”

“He’s right,” Deland said through gritted teeth. “It’s broken.”

“What are we going to do?” Doby whispered. “This was our last chance. What can we do for Djulla now?”

Anakin saw the desperation on the two brothers’ faces. Once again, he was faced with a choice. He had to make it for himself.

## **Jude Watson**

He had to do the right thing and trust that Obi-Wan would understand.

“I can pilot the Podracer,” he said. “If I win, your sister will go free.”

“But that isn’t fair,” Doby said. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“Because it is the right thing to do,” Anakin said.

He knew that from the bottom of his heart. But he still had to tell his Master.



## Chapter Thirteen

Obi-Wan stood across the street from Uso Yso's swoop shop. He had disguised himself as a space traveler, pulling on a dull gray cloak and a wrapped headdress. As he watched, a steady stream of visitors entered and left the shop. None of them left with a swoop. Apparently Yso was doing a thriving business in taking illegal bets.

Obi-Wan saw a short, plump figure suddenly dart across the street and head for Yso's dark front door. He sprinted across the street to catch up.

He yanked Didi back by the collar of his tunic. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. At least, nothing now, since you are holding my collar," Didi said.

"You said you were going to buy back Bog's speeder," Obi-Wan accused.

"I tried! I did! But the cheating monkey-lizard I sold it to upped the price," Didi told him. "I couldn't afford to buy back my own speeder! I need to raise a little cash, so I thought I would sell Bog's datapad and buy back his speeder instead."

Obi-Wan saw the datapad tucked under Didi's arm. "Let me see that."

## Jude Watson

There was a chance that someone on the Games Council knew the events were rigged. This might be an easy way to find out. He quickly accessed the information on Bog's system and flipped through random files. There didn't seem to be anything amiss. One file was labeled WAYS TO ADVANCE. Obi-Wan accessed it and read through a list of instructions Bog had written to himself.

BE FRIENDLY TO ALL!! THOSE WHO CANNOT HELP YOU TODAY CAN HELP YOU TOMORROW!!

DO MENIAL TASKS FOR IMPORTANT BEINGS!! IT MAKES YOU INDISPENSABLE!!

NEVER CONTRADICT A SUPERIOR!!

FOLLOW THE POWER!!!!!!

"You see what I have to put up with?" Didi sighed. "My poor Astri."

Obi-Wan accessed another file marked GAMES COUNCIL RESPONSIBILITIES. He scanned the notes carefully. It appeared that Bog's only job on the Games Council was arranging VIP seating. He had made lists matching Senators with exclusive gallery skyboxes for various events. So much for his importance.

Obi-Wan shut down the datapad. He tucked it inside his tunic.

"I was going to sell that!" Didi protested.

"It's not yours to sell. Didi, I know you won't take my advice. But things just might be more complicated than you realize. I'd advise you to stay away from betting."

"I assure you I will," Didi said, his brown eyes sincere.

Obi-Wan's comlink signaled. Jocasta Nu's voice came through crisply. He spoke so that Didi could not hear. "I found out who Quentor is. Were you playing a joke on me, Obi-Wan?" Jocasta Nu asked.

"No, of course not."

"There was no record of him anywhere, so I did the usual criminal search. Then a deep background trace. Nothing appeared."

"So he is an underground figure."

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

Jocasta Nu chuckled. "Not exactly. He's a yellow-tailed summerbird."

"He's a bird?"

"An unofficial pet of the Senate. He lives in the eaves of the building and the Senators leave him fruit and crumbs to feed on. If he's one of your suspects, I must warn you, he hasn't left Coruscant. He's most likely nibbling on muja fruit right about now."

Obi-Wan groaned, then thanked Jocasta Nu and cut the communication. Fligh had lied to him. That wasn't surprising. It was a lie worthy of Fligh, one calculated to delay him and amuse him.

But he wasn't amused.

He turned to Didi. "Do you know where Fligh is staying?"

Didi shook his head. "A guest house, I suppose. A hovel, I'm sure. Fligh is very cheap."

"Find out."

"Ah. Yes, Obi-Wan. I can see in your eyes that you need this information and I will not fail you." Didi bowed and rushed away.

Obi-Wan knocked on the door to Yso's shop, duplicating Didi's rhythmic knock. Someone hurried out, his face turned away. No one wanted to be recognized in this kind of place. Obi-Wan pretended to examine a beat-up swoop with a dented handlebar while he listened to the other occupant of the shop approach Uso Yso.

"I'd like to buy a swoop."

"At what price?"

The bettor named a figure, then said, "I'll take it to the blaster skill event where I hope to see Wesau T'orrin of Rezi-9 win."

"That is a good plan." Uso Yso slipped the credits into a wide belt he wore around his waist and entered some information into a datapad. He handed the bettor a small durasheet. "Here is your receipt."

## Jude Watson

Obi-Wan waited until the bettor had left the shop, then approached. "I'm here for a swoop," he said, looking up at the tall being. He waved a hand. "I would like to see your datapad."

Usó Yso snorted. "You don't need to see my datapad to buy a swoop. Which do you want?"

Obi-Wan waved his hand again. Usó Yso was unusually resistant to Jedi mind suggestion. "I'd like to see your datapad first."

"If you don't want to buy a swoop, you can leave," Usó Yso said, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

Obi-Wan suppressed his slight disappointment. No matter how adept a Jedi was or how strong the connection to the Force, sometimes mind suggestion just didn't work.

Obi-Wan followed the lead of the bettor, naming a figure, then saying, "I plan to take the swoop to the Podrace and hope that Deland Tyrell will be the winner."

Usó Yso shook his head. "There's been a last-minute change. A new driver. Do you still want the swoop?"

"Who is the driver?" Obi-Wan asked curiously.

Yso consulted his datapad. "Anakin Skywalker."

Obi-Wan felt the shock shimmer inside him, but he did not register surprise on his face.

"Well?" Yso demanded impatiently.

Before Obi-Wan could answer, a small, slight being with four eyes, two of them set on the sides of his head, slipped inside the shop. "Security patrol outside."

Usó Yso pushed a lever and a wall slid back, revealing more swoops in various stages of repair. "Besum!" He tossed a tool kit to his assistant. "Start working."

"I don't know how to fix a swoop!"

"I don't care," Yso snarled. "Just do it." He turned to Obi-Wan. "Security makes patrols every once in a while. Nothing to worry about."

Now that Yso was in danger of losing Obi-Wan's business, he was suddenly friendly. He had also left his datapad angled toward

## **STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games**

Obi-Wan, and the notations were easy to read. In the time it took for Yso to check on Besum's activities, Obi-Wan had scanned the file and memorized it.

To his surprise, the letters and numbers looked familiar. It took him only a moment to realize that they were similar to the notes recording the skybox seating on Bog's datapad.

Which meant that Bog wasn't recording seats for Senators. He was recording bets.

## Chapter Fourteen

Obi-Wan left the shop and found a quiet alley to peruse Bog's files. He read the names of the Senators who had the same notations as Yso's datapad. Some of the names he didn't recognize, but many he did. They were among the most illustrious and revered members.

He had no illusions about corruption in the Senate. But he was shocked to find that so many Senators would be involved in an illegal scheme such as this one. Among the names was Bail Organa, the Senator from Alderaan Obi-Wan had always respected for his integrity. Why would someone like Organa risk his career in order to make a few credits on a bet?

The bets had to be substantial, he supposed.

Or else the Senators have no fear that they'll be caught.

He had to deal with Anakin, but he had to pursue this first. Obi-Wan found Bog in a VIP box watching a match of krovation. When Astri saw him, her smile was wide and welcoming.

"Obi-Wan! How good of you to come by. The match is almost finished."

Obi-Wan looked at the two teams vying with poles on the field. "As much as I like krovatin, I have to decline. I'm here on business. I need to speak with Bog."

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

Astri's smile dimmed at the look on his face. She frowned and stepped aside. "Please join us."

Obi-Wan walked into the box. Bog fastened the jeweled clasp to his dark red septsilk robe as the Jedi approached.

"How can I help you, Obi-Wan?"

Obi-Wan hesitated, his hand on the datapad in his inner pocket. "If you prefer to speak alone..."

Bog smiled. "I hide nothing from Astri."

His smile showed not a trace of worry, but Astri walked to his side. Her eyes were grave now. Astri was perceptive, and she knew Obi-Wan well. "What is it, Obi-Wan?"

Obi-Wan withdrew the datapad. "I have something of yours."

Bog hurried forward. "You found it? Where? Thank you!"

Obi-Wan sidestepped the question of where he had found it. He slipped the datapad back into his pocket. "I'm afraid I can't return it just yet. I must confess that I took a look at your files, Bog."

Bog looked disconcerted. "Well, I see. I suppose that is all right. I have no secrets."

Obi-Wan was puzzled. Bog did not seem guilty or worried. "I accessed the file referring to the work you've done for the Senators."

"Yes, I arranged special seating for them," Bog said, nodding. "Is there a problem with some of the skyboxes?" He looked puzzled. "I didn't know Jedi cared about such things."

"We don't," Obi-Wan said quietly. "But you did not arrange skyboxes for the Senators. You placed bets for them on events in which the outcome is assured. This is not only illegal, but it has the potential to spark conflict among the member worlds."

"Obi-Wan, I don't know what you're talking about," Bog interrupted, shaking his head. "The Games are fixed? Senators betting? I can't believe that. All I did was place orders for special seating. You must be mistaken."

Obi-Wan studied Bog as the crowd around them roared at a player's score. "If you are not involved, you are being used.

## Jude Watson

Where did you get the instructions on how to proceed? How did you know which Senators to find seating for?"

"Liviani gave me the list of Senators," Bog said. "That is standard. The head of the Games Council always gets a list of important beings throughout the galaxy to accord special favors to. I used the Council funds to pay the Ruling Power for the skyboxes. You see, the Ruling Power makes the seating available. They have all the stadium plans. Arranging seating may seem trivial, but it's a very important task."

"So who did you contact to arrange the skyboxes?"

"As it turned out, I didn't have to contact anyone. He came to me. An odd four-eyed creature. His name was Boosa...no, that's not it. Beesa..."

"Besum?"

"That's it." Bog nodded as the crowd jeered a questionable play. "I transferred the credits and ordered the seating from Boosa...ah, Besum, and he handed me the receipts."

"Do you have them?"

"No. I placed them in the welcome packs for the Senators." At last the seriousness of the matter began to penetrate Bog's self-absorption. "I only followed protocol," he said nervously.

Obi-Wan frowned. Why would the Senators want receipts to be placed in their welcome packets? Anyone could see them. He would think they would go to great lengths to hide the fact that they were betting on the Games.

Could it be that the Senators themselves don't know about this?

Could it be that the Ruling Power has arranged this in order to disgrace them?

But why?

Bog grew restless at Obi-Wan's silence. "I didn't place any bets! I'm sure this is a misunderstanding."

"I'm sure it isn't," Astri said to her husband. "Obi-Wan knows what he's talking about." She turned to Obi-Wan. "Is Bog in trouble?"



## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

Bog swallowed. "If I am, I will face it."

"*We* will face it," Astri said, putting her hand on Bog's arm. "Together."

Obi-Wan saw the look that Bog gave Astri, a look of tenderness and devotion. He saw that Bog did love Astri, and his instincts told him that Bog had been used as a pawn in the scheme. No doubt whoever was behind it did not care if Bog took the fall.

Looking at the love on Astri's face for her husband, Obi-Wan decided that he would do anything in his power to make sure that did not happen. He remembered a time long ago when Astri had cut off her pretty curls, shaved her head, and learned how to shoot a blaster in order to help him track down Qui-Gon. She had not thought of herself as a brave person, but she had faced down blaster bolts and a laser whip, and had never left his side. No, he would not let anything happen to Astri.

"Bog will not be in trouble if he didn't do anything wrong," Obi-Wan told the couple. "I will make sure of that. Now, please excuse me."

Obi-Wan stepped outside, leaving the sounds of the match behind him. He quickly contacted Jocasta Nu at the Temple.

"I am sending you a list of Senators. I need to know if there is any link among them." Obi-Wan waited for her to read the list of names. "Does anything come to mind right now?" he asked.

"Nothing," Jocasta Nu said. "There are many ways Senators can be linked, Obi-Wan. Through sponsoring legislation. Committees. Subcommittees. Special hearings. Oversight subcommittees on special hearings—"

"I get the picture," Obi-Wan said. "Just do the best you can, as quickly as you can. Can you also look into the Ruling Power, and see if there is some connection with those Senators?"

"Of course. I'll contact you as soon as I have information."

Obi-Wan thanked Jocasta Nu and cut the communication. He leaned against the railing and looked out over the sprawling city. Beings streamed through the streets, and he could hear the

## Jude Watson

distant roar of a crowd in the nearby stadium. If the betting were exposed, the Senators involved would be drawn into a scandal. It would not matter if they were guilty or innocent. Their reputations would suffer. Was that the goal?

An insider, Fligh had said. It could be someone in the Ruling Power. Or someone close to the Games themselves.

He called up Bog's file on his datapad again. He flipped through the holographic files, remembering the notations on Uso Yso's screen.

The bets had been placed on the bowcaster skill contest, the obstacle course race, and the Podrace. The same events that Aarno Dering had on his datapad.

Obi-Wan contacted Didi on his comlink. "Have you found out where Fligh is staying?"

"The Sleek Cruiser Inn on Grand Eucer Street," Didi said. "Room 2222. But let me assure you, my friend, this inn is no sleek cruiser. More like a garbage barge."

"Just make sure Fligh doesn't go off-planet," Obi-Wan told Didi. "Contact me if he does."

"I am your servant, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan tapped his finger on his comlink, planning his next move. He could handle Fligh, but on the other hand, this was more than a pesky problem. It was time to call in the other Jedi teams.

He activated his comlink and contacted Siri. He filled her in on what he had discovered.

"It seems as though the Ruling Power could be behind this," he said. "They might want to blackmail Senators in order to gain power in the Senate, getting appointed to powerful posts. But we have no real proof, and we don't have much time. All three events are scheduled to take place this afternoon."

"What do you need?" Siri asked, getting to the point as quickly as possible, as she usually did.

"I have to pay a visit to Fligh, and I'd like some company," Obi-Wan said. "I think some additional Jedi presence is needed."

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

"I'll be there. And I'll contact Ry-Gaul," Siri said.

The problem of Anakin entering the Podrace had never left Obi-Wan's mind. Why had his Padawan done such a thing without telling him? It was not the first time Anakin's impulsiveness had worried and alarmed Obi-Wan.

His comlink signaled. Anakin was calling. Obi-Wan answered.

"Master, things have developed here," Anakin said. "Sebulba has recognized me. Because of that, Deland stepped in to avoid a fight and was injured. He cannot race. I...I offered to race in his place. Doby and Deland are trying to free their sister—"

"And is that your mission on Euceron, to free Djulla?" Obi-Wan asked sternly.

"No," Anakin said. "But was it Qui-Gon's mission to free me? Must we follow a mission so exactly that we turn our backs on beings who need help? *Every mission has a detour.* You've told me that."

"I've also told you that it is the mark of a Jedi to recognize whether or not to follow the detour," Obi-Wan reminded him.

"Then I ask you to let me make this choice," Anakin replied.

His Padawan's voice was firm. There was no pleading, no uncertainty. He wanted what he wanted. Was that the right thing in this circumstance?

Obi-Wan pondered the problem. "Have you learned anything else?" he asked.

"The Podrace is scheduled to take place this afternoon at three. A viewing area has been set up for spectators in the underground caves. Sebulba has placed enormous bets on his son to win. The official timekeeper is supposed to send the Podrace route directly to onboard computers. But I don't know who will take over the job now that Dering is dead. I think the best way I can find out how the race is fixed and who is behind it is to enter it myself."

"All right," Obi-Wan said reluctantly. He did not like the sound of pleasure in Anakin's voice. He would ask Siri and Ry-Gaul to send Ferus and Tru to observe while Anakin piloted the

## **Jude Watson**

Podracer. He could not be there with his Padawan, but he did not want Anakin to be alone.

## Chapter Fifteen

“I got it!” Anakin crowed. He tweaked the last screw to the energy-binder plate. “We’re set.”

“Whew,” Doby said, pushing his goggles to the top of his head. Two round circles of grime circled his eyes. “I was getting worried.”

“Maybe I should give the computer system another check,” Anakin wondered.

“I did it,” Deland said. “You’ve done enough, Anakin. I actually think we’re ready.” He patted the Podracer with his good hand. His other arm was encased in a rigid bandage from elbow to fingers.

Anakin jumped off the scaffold he’d used to work on the turbines. “I know I am.”

Suddenly, his smile dimmed. He spied Ferus and Tru threading their way toward him through a sea of pit droids and mechanics and pilots, the usual frenzy of a pit hangar before a race.

*My Master sent them. He doesn’t trust me.* The thought seared Anakin’s mind before rationality set in. It would be helpful to have backup, he told himself, trying to be logical. There was nothing wrong with that. He dodged a lubricant hose and went forward to meet them.

## Jude Watson

Tru's head swiveled, taking in the excitement. "Strange, if you think about it," he said to Anakin.

Anakin wiped his hands on a rag. "What?"

"That Podraces are so dangerous, but nobody looks scared," he said.

"There are beings who equate danger with pleasure," Ferus said, his eyes dark with disapproval. "It is a mistake easily made for those who do not think deeply." He gave Anakin a cool look.

"Well, there's such a thing as fun, Ferus," Tru said amiably. "Even you have to admit that."

"Yes," Ferus said. "But not here." His cool gaze did not falter as he studied Anakin. "I'm not clear on why you are racing, Anakin."

"It is the best way to discover how the race is fixed," Anakin said.

Ferus shifted his gaze to take in Doby and Deland and the Podracer, then scanned the rest of the hangar. "I see. Our Masters have told us that it is possible that advance knowledge of the track will be sent to one Podracer's nav computer seconds before it is given to the rest. Do you know which Podracer that is?"

"Hekula," Anakin said. "The Dug. The third Podracer down on the left."

"You know this for sure?"

"It is a guess," Anakin admitted. "Based on my knowledge of him."

Ferus turned back. "And that is all?"

"Sebulba, his father, proposed the new rule," Anakin said. "Sebulba never proposes anything unless he knows he can profit by it."

"Do you know when and how the information will be transmitted to the nav computers?"

"At the start of the race, and then at three-minute intervals," Anakin said.

"So how do you propose to beat him?" Ferus asked.

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

“By being faster and better,” Anakin answered. “I have something he doesn’t have. I have the Force.”

“Who is the timekeeper?” Tru asked. “Do you think he is the one who will transmit the information?”

Anakin nodded. “A race referee. The computer system is already in place. Dering has already designed the program. This person will just follow instructions.”

Ferus frowned. “Isn’t there any way to tell whoever is in charge of the race what is going on? Surely it would be better to simply cancel the race. Did you think of that?”

Anakin’s cheeks flushed. Ferus was questioning every detail of what he had learned as though he were a Jedi Master and Anakin was his Padawan.

“I’m sure Anakin thought of it,” Tru said. “But we can’t be sure who knows that the program is a cheat. Whoever it is could alter it with a keystroke and we’d never know who was behind it, or why.”

“Maybe there is still some way to find out,” Ferus said. “Tru and I will investigate.” He glanced at the Podracer. “You can go back to your energy-binder plate.”

Tru hung back as Ferus walked off. “He’s just being careful,” he told Anakin.

Anakin’s teeth gritted. “Is that what you call it?”

“You’ll understand him one day,” Tru said. “After you become friends.”

“I will never be friends with Ferus Olin,” Anakin answered savagely.

Tru studied him for a moment. “I feel...some darkness from you, Anakin. Your enemy is here. But Sebulba cannot hurt you anymore. Remember, Jedi do not have enemies.”

“I just want to win,” Anakin said.

“You mean you want to prevent injury and ensure fairness,” Tru corrected.

Anakin nodded. “That too.”

## Chapter Sixteen

The Sleek Cruiser Inn was just as Didi had described it, a dilapidated building made of patchwork plasteel sheeting. Seeing a way to rake in more credits, the owner had leased out space in the hallways and closets. Travelers from around the galaxy had stashed gear in every spare space and were cooking up meals on portable stoves in the hallways. Others had rolled themselves in bedrolls in various corners and were trying to catch a nap between events. The smell of bodies, food, and dust was overwhelming. Even this far from the Games, the hum of the crowds in the arenas could be heard. Obi-Wan, Siri, and Ry-Gaul picked through the mess and knocked on Fligh's door.

"I said I would settle the bill on the way out!" Fligh yelled behind the door. "Such a hospitable establishment, I can't wait to return!" He flung the door open and saw the Jedi. He swallowed. "Ah, Jedi. Always a good sign."

He stepped aside and let them enter. Belongings were stuffed into an open case. Still-wet laundry spilled out of a travel pack. A half-eaten meal was spread on the sleep couch. It was clear that Fligh was in the midst of a hasty departure.

"Leaving so soon?" Obi-Wan asked. "The Games have just begun."

"I'm not a fan," Fligh said, shrugging. "There you go."



## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

"Yet you came here to see the Games," Obi-Wan pointed out. "Don't you want to see how your bets turn out?"

Fligh laughed. "Why? You have made sure I don't win. I may as well return to Coruscant and make my living honestly, as a thief."

Siri and Ry-Gaul closed the door and stood in front of it. Obi-Wan casually flung one leg over a stool and sat. "A funny thing happened after we left you this morning. We took an air taxi—"

"Always a good idea," Fligh said nervously. "The streets are so crowded."

"—and the pilot tried to crash it," Obi-Wan went on. "Odd that he knew just where we were and where we were headed."

"Maybe you were just lucky."

"Maybe you'd like to accompany us to the security office of the Ruling Power and talk about it," Obi-Wan said. It was a bluff. He did not want the Ruling Power to know that they were investigating.

Fligh gave a squeak of disappointment and threw himself down on the unmade sleep couch. "I knew I'd never make it off this blasted planet. All right. When you came to ask me about the fixed events, you made me nervous. Why wouldn't I be? I saw my fortune disappearing in front of my eyes. So I might have alerted someone as to your presence. They weren't supposed to kill you. Just delay you. I swear! Didi is my friend. I would never allow harm to come to him. And if you think I'd tangle with Jedi, you underestimate my cowardice."

"Yet you lie to us," Obi-Wan said.

"And that is never a good idea," Siri said.

Ry-Gaul did not have to say a word. His fierce looks spoke for him.

"Yes, I see what you mean," Fligh said, backing away on the sleep couch.

"Now, tell me again about your friend Quentor," Obi-Wan said, leaning forward.

## Jude Watson

“Ha ha,” Fligh said. “I see you know about my little joke. I thought it better to protect a friend than expose him.”

“Who?” Obi-Wan asked softly. “And tell me the truth this time.”

“Aarno Dering,” Fligh said. “Weeks ago, I was contacted anonymously. Through messages on my datapad. I was asked to find someone who could rig a false timing device for a major race. Credits were transferred into my account with a promise of a sure bet to come. I happened to know just the person they needed. Aarno had been the timekeeper for races in the Outer Rim. He was known for a certain...uh, casualness when it came to scorekeeping. Then the anonymous person said they would hire Aarno for the Galactic Games. The Galactic Games! I had no idea it was for something so grand.”

“How could he pass scrutiny?” Siri wondered. “The timers and judges are screened very closely.”

“That was just my question,” Fligh said, nodding. “They told me not to worry about it. To my great surprise, Aarno was hired for several events. To Aarno’s surprise as well.”

“That’s why you concluded that an insider had to be involved,” Obi-Wan said.

Fligh nodded. “Who else could get Aarno hired, with his record? So we came to Euceron and Aarno got his instructions. It seemed like a deal as sweet as a piece of blumfruit. Aarno would find a way to shave a few seconds here and there and we’d take off with a small fortune. I didn’t expect anyone to get hurt. Didi was almost killed, and Aarno got run over by a speeder.” Fligh shivered. “I’m going back to Coruscant, where I’ll be safe. I just paved the way for some bets to be placed. I didn’t want anyone to get killed.”

“You got the false text docs for Dering,” Obi-Wan guessed. “Why did he suddenly want to get off-planet?”

“I guess he lost his nerve,” Fligh said with a nervous glance at Ry-Gaul.

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

Siri had moved so that she was now sitting in front of Fligh on her haunches, her hands dangling. Her bright blue gaze was piercing. “There is something you’re not telling us. Why was Aarno so afraid?”

Fligh fingered one of his long ears. “I had an appointment to drop the text docs off to Aarno right after the swoop race. As soon as you left, I went to his quarters and waited for him. He was in a big hurry to leave Euceron, and I asked him why. He said if I knew what was good for me, I’d leave too. Of course, I had to pressure him. I withheld the text docs until he told me. He thought he had been hired just to fix the events. But then he found out something else. Something’s going to happen during an event. Something will go wrong. They want people to get killed during an event so that the Senators will be blamed.”

“Which event?” Obi-Wan asked.

“I don’t know,” Fligh admitted. “Aarno didn’t tell me. He found out by mistake. He was afraid they would come after him because he knew.”

“Who are *they*?” Siri barked in frustration.

“I didn’t ask,” Fligh said with a shudder. “I don’t want to know. I’m in over my head. And if I know anything about anything—which I don’t, but I know about this—sooner or later it’s going to occur to them that I know too much. And it’s going to be sooner, not later. All in all I’d rather be on Coruscant, so if you don’t mind—”

Obi-Wan, Siri, and Ry-Gaul turned toward the door at the same instant. The surge in the Force had warned them. At the same time, the sound of heavy rolling could be heard in the corridor outside Fligh’s room.

“Hey, I’m over here, guys,” Fligh said. “Are you going to answer my quest—”

Before Fligh could finish the word, the door blasted apart and a squad of droidekas appeared in the smoldering opening.

## Chapter Seventeen

Fligh dived behind the sleep couch as the Jedi ignited their lightsabers. The droidekas unfurled and snapped into attack position, blaster bolts firing. Obi-Wan's lightsaber was an arc of moving light, deflecting the shower of blaster fire. Beside him Siri's lightsaber swung in a continuous arc of precise movement, with Siri's two-handed grip and her graceful footwork. Ry-Gaul did not move. He did not need to. His long arms were a blur in the air as his lightsaber shifted from hand to hand.

The three-legged droidekas were built for battle and close to invincible—but these droidekas weren't shielded. Their heavy armor shells and volts of firepower as well as their maneuverability made them capable of cutting down opponents with fearsome efficiency.

It wasn't as though their power alarmed Obi-Wan. But he still was not especially pleased to see them. There were twelve of them, so he was glad to have Ry-Gaul and Siri by his side.

The air filled with smoke as the blaster bolts zinged, but the Jedi deflected them and struck blow after blow at the heavy armor plates on the droids. Because the doorway was narrow, the droidekas began firing through the wall itself, quickly tearing gaping holes in the structure. After a sweep from Siri's lightsaber, one droideka smoked and fell, and another, its legs gone,

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

bobbled and spun until it crashed against a wall. Obi-Wan sliced a droideka in two and sent one piece flying over the sleep couch and crashing into the wall. Fligh shrieked as pieces of hot metal rained down on him.

Droidekas had control centers, not brains. They could not feel fear or apprehension. The amazing skill of the Jedi was lost on them. They continued to advance and fire, continued to evade by rolling themselves into balls and repositioning themselves to fire again. Time after time they attacked, and time after time the Jedi struck blow after blow until the harsh smoke and the heat caused Fligh to have a coughing fit. The Jedi did not react to the smoke. Their minds and bodies were focused on battle, and nothing else mattered but the moment.

Suddenly all three Jedi exchanged a glance. They leaped back as the flimsy wall collapsed on the remaining droidekas. Ry-Gaul, Obi-Wan, and Siri finished the rest off, disabling them with lightsaber thrusts. At last the droidekas lay around them in pieces. Fligh raised his head from behind the sleep couch.

His voice was hoarse. "Can I go now?"

"He can't help us," Obi-Wan told the others. "He's told us everything he knows." He deactivated his lightsaber. "Yes, Fligh. You can go."

"Until next time, Obi-Wan," Fligh said fervently.

"I certainly hope not," Obi-Wan answered. Wherever Fligh was, trouble was soon to follow.

With a last bow, Fligh ran from the room, his belongings trailing from his packing case.

"If they're sending Destroyer Droids, they must be worried," Siri said. "Whoever *they* are."

"One of us should attend each event," Obi-Wan said. "The Padawans are already at the Podrace and it's scheduled to begin in...fifteen minutes. Can you head out there, Ry-Gaul? I'll contact Anakin and tell him that something is supposed to go wrong, but I'd feel better if you were there."

## Jude Watson

Ry-Gaul gave a short nod and left the room, stepping over a pile of droidekas in the doorway.

"I'll take the bowcaster skill contest," Siri said. "It's at Stadium Seven."

"That leaves me with the obstacle course," Obi-Wan said, nodding. "Stay in touch."

"I just wish I knew what I was looking for," Siri said.

Obi-Wan tucked his lightsaber into his belt. "That makes two of us."

Obi-Wan was able to give Anakin an update on the way to Stadium Nine. There was nothing much for Anakin to do except what the rest of them were doing—being mindful, and watching.

Obi-Wan strode into the stadium. He felt the heat and the noise of a crowd eager for the event to begin.

As the Euceron hero and record-setter for the event in the last Galactic Games, Maxo Vista was here as well. Obi-Wan found a seat as close to the judges as he could and watched on a viewscreen overhead while Vista's podium zoomed to the center of the stadium.

"Welcome, all," he said, his voice amplified throughout the stadium. "I'd like to introduce myself. I am—"

"MAXO VISTA!" the crowd roared.

"You may not remember me—"

The crowd roared once again.

"—but I was at this event seven years ago—"

A cheer went up.

"—I didn't do too badly—" Vista paused and waited for the cheers and laughter "—and I truly hope that today, my record will be broken. I'm just a Galactic Games official now, seven years older and seven years slower, so I'd better make way for the next generation of athletes."

The broad grin still on his face, Vista suddenly vaulted off the platform. The crowd gasped, but a cable launcher hidden in Vista's belt let out a long line, and he bounced at the end of it, only centimeters away from the ground. With a powerful thrust,

## **STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games**

he flipped his body upward, then twisted, flew through the air, and landed on his feet. His movements were so graceful it was more like a dance than an athletic feat.

The crowd erupted in cheers and applause. The cheers went on and on.

The cheers fell away for Obi-Wan. He heard only the absence of sound, the silence of concentration and revelation.

The lines of Vista's body were suddenly familiar, the fluid, powerful way he moved. The way he made something that took great effort look effortless.

Maxo Vista was the air-taxi pilot who had tried to kill them. And he was the speeder driver who had run down Aarno Dering.

Which meant that the great hero of Euceron was the insider who was behind fixing the Games.

## Chapter Eighteen

It was his fault. If he hadn't been so irritated at *not* knowing who Maxo Vista was, he would have looked closer at him. He had made a mistake worthy of a Jedi Temple student, not an experienced Jedi Knight. He had allowed his own perspective, his own emotion, to color his perception.

Perception comes from not one but all angles at once.

Yes, Qui-Gon.

Obi-Wan raced down the moving walkway that circled the stadium. He had to make it down to Level Twenty, where Maxo Vista would enter the VIP box. He could not risk losing Maxo Vista the way he had lost Aarno Dering.

He was almost at the door of the box when Astri dashed toward him, curls bouncing and robe swirling. "Obi-Wan!"

"Later," he said tersely, striding toward the door.

She grabbed his arm. "You must know this! The Podrace! Something terrible is going to happen!"

He half-turned and searched her dark eyes. "How do you know this?"

"Bog," she said. "He went to Maxo Vista to tell him what you had discovered—"

Obi-Wan almost groaned aloud.



## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

“—Vista wasn’t there, and so Bog accessed his datapad. He thought as a fellow Council member he could do this—” Her hand to her throat, Astri got the words out fast, between her panting breaths. “—and discovered that the Podrace is not only fixed, but booby-trapped. The nav computer will lead the Podracers close to the city’s hub. The lead Podracer will get taken over by the nav computer. It will be made to crash into the crowd! We don’t know if Vista himself is aware of this, it could have been sent to his dataport without his knowing. We cannot believe that Maxo Vista would be involved. Bog replaced the datapad and told me what he’d seen. He is going to tell Liviani Sarno. But I came to you.”

“Does Vista know about this?” *Anakin is in danger.* Obi-Wan reached for his comlink as he asked the question.

“I didn’t. But now I do.” Vista’s voice came from behind him. He smiled as Obi-Wan turned. “I promise you, I can explain everything. This way, Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan hesitated.

“Trust me.” Maxo Vista had a blaster pointed at Astri, but the friendly grin was still on his face. Astri could not see the blaster, which was on his other side.

“This way,” he repeated meaningfully to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan stepped inside. He would follow Maxo Vista’s instructions, but only for a few seconds. He had to make sure Vista would not hit anyone with blaster fire.

The floor moved under his feet. He realized that he had not stepped out into the VIP box, but onto a moving podium. It suddenly zoomed to the center of the stadium. Vista’s hand dropped and the blaster was lost in the folds of his cloak.

“It is a long-range model, and it is still pointed at Astri,” he said pleasantly.

Obi-Wan tried to signal Astri to move, but she stood watching him from afar, not knowing the blaster was pointed at her. He could reach for his lightsaber, but he wasn’t sure if even he could be fast enough to block the shot.

## Jude Watson

Light suddenly hit his eyes, dazzling him for a moment. “Welcome to the exhibition match!” Maxo Vista’s voice was amplified throughout the stadium. “Jedi against athlete! Let the event begin!”

The crowd roared. A cube of white light settled over Obi-Wan. Another flashed over Maxo Vista. A holographic image of a treton, a wild creature from the planet Aesolian, appeared in front of them. On the tip of one pointed ear a green laser glowed. His snarl was amplified and echoed through the stadium. There was a collective *ooooohh* of fear. Even though the spectators knew the treton was holographic, its fierce battle cry struck terror into their hearts.

An announcer’s steady voice boomed over the stadium. “Ten seconds. Contestants, prepare....”

Obi-Wan reached for his comlink to contact Anakin, but it was dead. Now he remembered that in the stadium center a jamming device was employed so that no contestants could use hidden devices to aid them in their events. Maxo Vista had trapped him, no doubt in order to buy time.

Obi-Wan judged the distance back to the stadium. It was too far. The podium was too high for even a cable launcher. He would have to wait. He was now officially in the obstacle course, and subject to its rules. He was trapped. And Anakin was just about to begin the Podrace.

“Welcome to my world, Obi-Wan Kenobi,” Maxo Vista whispered. “I had a feeling the Jedi would show up, so I’ve been planning this. Sorry it had to be this way, but at least you’ll have some fun before you die.”

“Five seconds, contestants...”

A lightweight weapon emerged out of the platform floor in front of Obi-Wan. He grabbed it. At the tip was a green laser. Obi-Wan guessed that in order to score points, he would have to hit the laser on the hologram with the laser tip of his weapon. He wished he had seen a holographic obstacle course before. He had no idea what was in store.

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

“Yes, Obi-Wan. Something will go wrong and you will die in this stadium. You won’t know when it will come, or how to fight it.” Maxo Vista smiled. “May the best man win. Which means me, of course.”

“Begin!” the announcer said.

The treton rushed forward. Maxo Vista was prepared. He charged ahead and slashed at the Treton even as it zoomed upward and around in a crazy evasive dance that no bulky treton would ever accomplish. Vista hit the creature precisely on the ear and a loud joyful *clang clang!* resounded through the stadium.

“Point, Vista,” the voice announced. The stadium erupted in cheers for the favorite.

Obi-Wan’s laser tip now glowed pink. The edge of the platform elongated into a ramp that rose almost straight upward. Vista began to bound ahead.

After a second of hesitation, Obi-Wan followed. He had no choice. He would have to hope that somewhere in the course he would be able to break free.

Obi-Wan gained on Vista easily. At the top of the ramp six snarling holographic neks sat guard. At the center of their collars, a laser glowed like a pink jewel.

Now Obi-Wan knew that he had to hit each of the creatures precisely with the tip of his weapon, laser to laser, in order to progress.

Vista sprang forward as the nek on the far left lunged, teeth bared. Vista twisted, but the holographic teeth grazed his ankle. A harsh buzzer sounded.

“Minus point five,” the announcer said.

Obi-Wan somersaulted, avoiding the two neks who flew at him. He used the weapon like a lightsaber, touching the collars lightly. Two loud *clang clang! clang clang!* noises sounded, and he whirled and touched the other collars just as delicately, even as Vista was moving toward them. *Clang clang!* The neks dissolved in a shower of light.

## Jude Watson

“Six points, Visitor.” This time the cheers were not nearly as deafening.

The laser shifted to blue. Ahead was a cliff face with shallow ledges forming a pathway upward. At the top were three multi-clawed ravenscreechers, large birds from the Outer Rim planet Wxtm. Each had a large wing span and six legs with claws half a meter long. Instead of an eye, a bright blue laser spot winked at Obi-Wan from each bird.

Vista hurled himself at the cliff and began to climb. Obi-Wan followed. Vista reached out a leg and tried to kick him. The crowd hissed disapproval. No doubt Vista was risking the displeasure of the crowd in order to vent his anger at Obi-Wan defeating all the neks.

Yes, you are a record-holder, *Obi-Wan thought*. But you’ve never competed against a Jedi.

Accessing the Force, he vaulted into the air, bypassing Vista and landing on a ledge close to the edge. The ravenscreechers took off, diving toward him.

While the crowd roared and cheered, Obi-Wan held on with only one hand. He slashed at one holographic bird, touching its eye and gaining a point, then hit the next one on a backswing without even turning. Using the momentum, he swung himself up to the top of the cliff and hit the third one as it rose to attack him.

*Clang clang!* The points rang up on the screen. His laser tip flashed yellow. Now more of the crowd was on his side, and Maxo Vista was furious. His face was bright red as he scrambled from ledge to ledge, racing to catch Obi-Wan.

On top of the ledge sat two swoops. Obi-Wan was about to spring forward when a tentacle bush appeared, its branches reaching out for him. It took him a moment to locate the tiny glowing tip of the yellow laser in the heart of the bush. If one of the other branches hit him, he would lose points.

He could feel Vista behind him and was not surprised when the man launched himself at the bush. He knew Vista was

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

furious, and anger would make him careless. He would give Vista the first chance at the bush, but he would not allow him to beat him to the swoops.

The branches moved like the arms of dancers, fluid and graceful, yet lethal in their striking motions. In his fury, Vista tried to attack the bush with stabbing motions, but the waving branches kept him just out of reach. His movements were as fluid as that of the branches, and the crowd began to chant his name.

Obi-Wan leaped. He somersaulted in midair, keeping his legs tucked close to his body to avoid the waving branches. When he was dead center over the bush, he reached down amid the cluster of wildly waving branches and touched the glowing laser with his weapon. Then he landed precisely on one of the swoops, legs astride, and took off. The whole operation had taken less than three seconds.

The crowd was stunned into silence. The noise of the announcer echoed through the nearly silent stadium.

“Point, Visitor.”

The crowd went wild.

Obi-Wan did not think about what was behind him. Only what was ahead. The minutes were ticking away, and he had to contact Anakin. The worry ticked away inside him, but his movements did not betray him. Vista’s warning that something would occur on the course didn’t worry him. He trusted in the Force to warn him.

Ahead were glowing circles of light. Holographic humming peepers twittered overhead. Each held a tiny violet laser in its beak. Obi-Wan saw that he would have to navigate through the spinning circles without touching the edges of each one, hitting as many humming peepers as he could. This obstacle did not require strength, but agility and precision.

He did not look behind him, but he knew Maxo Vista was pushing his swoop to maximum speed. Obi-Wan only saw the glowing obstacles and the tiny birds. He dived through the first

## Jude Watson

hoop and delicately touched the tiny bird with his weapon. The clanging noise sounded, then sounded again a second later. Vista, too, had scored a point.

Vista piloted the swoop as if it were part of his body. He leaned over and scored another point, then flipped the swoop to quickly zoom through a circle. The crowd kept up a steady roar now. Vista pushed his swoop, aiming for the back of Obi-Wan's. He bumped Obi-Wan's swoop but it appeared he was only attempting to get through the next loop. Obi-Wan knew better. He dived, engines screaming, then came at the next loop from an extreme right angle. He zoomed through the loop with a centimeter to spare. Taken off guard, Maxo Vista brushed against the side of the loop and lost five points.

Obi-Wan zigzagged through the air of the stadium, sailing through the loops and hitting the laser targets. Vista gave up trying to unseat him and concentrated on gaining points. Soon the humming peepers had all been hit. The glowing hoops dissolved into particles of light.

The stadium went black. Obi-Wan immediately pulled back on the swoop's power and hovered in the air, waiting. Below, on the mid-level landing platform, a group of holographic Gladiator Droids appeared. Bright orange erupted from flame projectors in their fists. A bright red laser winked in the center of their foreheads.

Obi-Wan flew down to the landing platform and leaped off the swoop. The Gladiator Droids shot blaster fire at him, just harmless points of light. The flames licked close to him but there was no heat. He could not use the race weapon or his lightsaber against light, so he had to dodge the flames and blaster bolts.

This obstacle was similar to an exercise called Art of Movement at the Temple, introduced to him when he was just a student, even younger than Anakin. The students were required to keep moving, dodging both lines of light that zigzagged the room and points that scampered randomly. The objective was simply to get from the door to the opposite wall. The exercise

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

required split-second timing and an agile body. Some students were better than others at compressing their limbs, jumping, and flattening themselves against the floor. As a human, Obi-Wan was hampered by his solid skeletal frame, but he had practiced for hours until he could judge the best way to move with a minimum of effort. He had even had private tutorials with the Jedi Knight Fy-Tor-Ana, known for her grace.

All of the lessons came back to him in a rush. He had not trained for this specifically, as Maxo Vista had. He hadn't practiced the Art of Movement in years. But he could feel his body respond and move even as the laser points skittered around him. Using the Force, he was able to gauge where the pinpoints of light would hit.

Maxo Vista had trained for this. He was adept at movement. The crowd gasped at the flexible grace of the two opponents. Obi-Wan got close enough to one Gladiator Droid to score a point. Vista scored another. In the dim light, the shimmering outlines of the Droids melted against the velvet darkness.

Obi-Wan could feel the Force around him and feel the ripples of disturbance. Maxo Vista's surprise was near. Even as he dodged the light and moved in to strike another blow at a Gladiator Droid, he knew what was coming.

One of the Droids was real.

Obi-Wan had to use the Force. It was too dark to be absolutely sure. The lights exploding around him could be lethal or not. He noted now that Maxo Vista was pretending to be slow, keeping Obi-Wan between him and the fire.

He saw a Gladiator Droid well behind the others, its blasters firing. That was the one.

He unsheathed his lightsaber. With his lightsaber in one hand and his event weapon in the other, he leaped. With one hand, he hit each laser target on each droid, twisting and hanging in midair. With the other, he deflected the real blaster fire.

He ended with a midair somersault and sank his lightsaber into the real droid's control panel.

## **Jude Watson**

The counter rang furiously. The scoreboard lit up. The crowd was on its feet now, stamping its approval.

The lights in the stadium came up. Maxo Vista raised his head from his position crouching on the floor. He blinked, surprised to hear the boos directed at him.

The crowd screamed for the Jedi. But Obi-Wan had disappeared.



## Chapter Nineteen

Doby and Deland paced nervously by the Podracer. “Maybe we should check the intake valves again,” Doby said.

“We’ve checked them three times,” Anakin said. “Everything is fine. We’re ready to go.”

He was strapped into his seat, his goggles pushed up on his head. The official starter stood talking to the Podrace organizer. Hekula was receiving last-minute instructions from Sebulba.

It all felt so familiar. He could be back in the Mos Espa Grand Arena again. His mother was watching. Qui-Gon and Padmé were there. He wanted to do his best for them.

Anakin swallowed against the emotion that swelled in him. He was older now. Things were more complicated. His emotions would never be so simple again. But here in the cockpit doubt fell away and uncertainty had no place. Left behind was only one goal: winning. “All right, then,” Deland said. He held his arm carefully against his side, and his face was pale. “Good luck, Anakin. We won’t forget this. Neither will Djulla.”

“We shouldn’t have let you, but we had to.” Doby leaned in to speak to him earnestly. “Don’t worry. You’re going to win. Just don’t crash.”

Anakin grinned. “Right.”

## Jude Watson

“Come on, Doby, you’re making him nervous.” Deland yanked his brother away.

Ry-Gaul approached Anakin. He stood by the Podracer, his gray eyes scanning the spectators who had gathered on the stands near the finish line. “You must use the Force to stay ahead. There is darkness here, but I cannot locate it.”

It was the longest speech Anakin had ever heard Ry-Gaul give. Anakin nodded. “I feel it, too.” But along with the darkness, he felt the excitement of the race to come.

Tru waved at him from the sidelines. Anakin gave him a thumbs-up, just as he had to his best friend Kitster so many years ago.

“Start your engines,” the race official called.

Anakin engaged his engines. They roared to life. Ry-Gaul’s mouth moved, but he couldn’t hear the words. It didn’t matter. He knew what Ry-Gaul had said.

May the Force be with you.

The noise of the powerful engines of eight Podracers was deafening. It bounced off the high cave walls. The floor shook like a groundquake. Besides himself, Hekula, and Aldar Beedo, Anakin recognized Gargano, Elan Mak, and Ody Mandrell. The last two Podracers were Scorch Zanales, a Daimlo, and Will Neluenf, heir to the first great Tatooine Podracer, Ben Neluenf.

Anakin felt the power of the engines under his hands. He felt warm and liquid, alert and calm. His senses were hyperaware. The shimmer of the air, the dull red of the cave walls, the smell of the fuel—it filled his head and sharpened his focus. He was ready.

He kept his eye on the starting light. It turned from red to yellow...

Green! Anakin pushed the throttle and the engines roared in response. He had always believed in a quick start. His old Podracer had been tweaked to allow for maximum fuel flow. Deland’s Podracer surged forward in a pack with the others, but

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

slightly ahead. He allowed himself one glance over at Hekula. Sebulba's son bared his teeth at Anakin.

Anakin checked the nav computer. In a glance he saw the route ahead. Down a long underground canyon, then through a series of dips and rolls. Then he needed to take a sharp left down a narrow passage. After that he would receive the next stage of the course.

The cave walls were a blur of dusty red and the screaming engines were just a backdrop of constant sound as Anakin raced through the canyon. Hekula pulled ahead, the double engines of Anakin's old pod bobbing on the air current created by his speed. Anakin stayed close on Hekula's tail, avoiding the flying engines. The other Podracers were reluctant to get too close. Anakin knew from experience how the engines would move as Hekula maneuvered. He dared to race snug against the back of Hekula's Podracer, knowing he was making Hekula angry and nervous.

The dips were ahead. Anakin pulled back suddenly, and Hekula shot in front. Anakin dived, timing his movement so that he was able to barely scoot underneath Hekula's Podracer and then rise up before the dip rose into a small hill.

He was in the lead. But Hekula had the next part of the course by now. He was most likely already planning his strategy for the next round of challenges. Anakin would have to rely on his instincts to keep him in the lead.

Behind him, Ody Mandrell couldn't make the sharp turn into the passage. Anakin heard the shriek of metal and the crash. Smoke rolled toward him and he pushed the engines as hard as he dared, trying to outrun the smoke before it blinded him.

Hekula was pulling slightly to the left. Anakin didn't know why but guessed he was preparing to pass him on the next segment...whatever it was. Just then the nav computer blinked, showing him the next part of the course. He just had time to register the details, but it was as though he had already seen the track.

## Jude Watson

He turned sharply on the first corner, then turned again to the left, then the right. Hekula kept up with his every move. Anakin could see his face when he glanced behind, could almost hear Hekula's cackling laugh.

Behind them, Elan and Aldar Beedo collided, after Elan made a move to cut off Aldar. The others had to scramble to avoid hitting them or the drivers, who had crawled from the wreckage to accuse each other. The sight was gone in a moment as Anakin whipped around another corner.

The controls shook in his hand at the constant turns. Hekula was gaining. He needed all his concentration for the next segment...

His comlink signaled.

Anakin considered not answering it, but he knew he must. It could be his Master.

He released the control for an instant and pressed the activation key. He strained to hear his Master over the noise.

"...nav computer...accident...prepare for..."

Anakin kept one hand on the controls and snatched the comlink. He held it tight against his ear. "Repeat!" he shouted into the comlink.

Now Obi-Wan's voice was clearer, but he still lost some words over the noise rebounding off the cave walls. "One of the Podracers is booby-trapped...nav computer will lead...Eusebus...the lead Podracer's steering mechanism will blow. It will be made to crash into a crowd...hear me, Anakin?"

"Copy that!" Anakin shouted. He threw the comlink back down.

The lapse in concentration had cost him. As his Podracer burst out of the maze, Hekula passed him on the inside and took the lead.

His nav computer flashed. The course now would wind through a series of turns, then open out into a large tunnel. Then the five remaining Podracers would burst out of the tunnel onto the city streets. So Obi-Wan's prediction was right.

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

Anakin quickly turned to the left before the cave wall curved. He was able to pass Hekula easily. Obviously, Hekula was not as adept a racer as his father. With advance knowledge of that turn, he should have hugged the wall to prevent Anakin's maneuver. Hekula tried to bump him from behind, but Anakin pulled ahead.

He raced through the tunnel, wondering what to do when he reached the city streets. If he slowed, the others would pass him, and there would be more danger to the pedestrians. The best he could do was stay ahead to lead the pack away from pedestrians and hope he could master the Podracer when its steering blew.

As Anakin zoomed onto the streets, he saw astonished faces and beings quickly running to get out of the way. He slowed slightly, but not enough to let Hekula pass him.

Suddenly Hekula pulled up next to him. He tried to use an old trick of his father's, flashing Anakin's engine with side vents so that he'd overheat. Anakin pulled ahead slightly to avoid the steam.

The next segment flashed onscreen. Down a boulevard, then up a steep hill and down the other side. The boulevard would then narrow into an alley, then open up once again.

The turn onto the boulevard would be tricky, a near-180-degree maneuver. Anakin eased to the right so he would be able to make the turn. Hekula kept going straight. When the turn appeared, Anakin took it easily, but Hekula had to struggle to keep his Podracer on course.

Engines screaming, they raced up the hill. Speeders accelerated to get out of their way, and pedestrians scattered. Anakin's hands began to shake, and he realized that his controls were vibrating. His warning light suddenly flashed red.

The steering mechanism was failing.

## Chapter Twenty

Obi-Wan had run off the edge of the platform and made a midair leap into the box of surprised VIP spectators. Then he dashed out into the stadium hall and was met by Siri.

“Not much excitement at the bowcaster skill event, so I thought I’d see how you were doing,” she said. “I didn’t realize you’d be competing.”

Obi-Wan made the call to Anakin warning him about the steering mechanism. “We have to get down there.”

“Where?” Siri pointed out. “We don’t know where the Podracers will emerge from the caves. Nobody knows the track.”

“Maxo Vista does.”

They raced down to the exiting area, where Maxo Vista was hurrying off in disgrace. When he saw the Jedi he tried to flee, but Siri took three strides forward and pinned him to a wall.

“Not so fast,” she said. “We have some questions for you.”

“I don’t have anything to say.” Maxo Vista’s eyes burned with hatred for Obi-Wan.

Siri reached into Vista’s tunic pocket. “We’ll let your datapad do the talking.”

She tossed the datapad to Obi-Wan and he quickly accessed Vista’s files. Obi-Wan felt the urgency as he called up holofile

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

after holofile, but his hands were steady and his eyes never stopped moving.

"Here," he said. "Here is the route. The steering mechanism will fail after the hill."

"Does it say which Podracer will be affected?" Siri asked.

"No." Even as he was speaking, he was contacting Anakin. "After the steep hill," he said quickly into his comlink, "the steering mech—"

"I know!" Anakin shouted. "It's mine! I can't—"

Anakin's words were drowned out by a loud crash and the comlink went dead.

Maxo Vista smiled. "It appears you were too late."

The crash occurred between Gargano and Zanales, who had been closely tailing Anakin and Hekula. Anakin did not look back to make sure that no one was hurt. He was too busy trying to bypass the steering mechanism. He guessed that it had been wired to blow through the nav computer.

He was controlling the Podracer through the engines now, just managing to keep it on course. Hekula had zoomed ahead.

A crowd of spectators stood on a corner ahead, right after a sharp curve. Anakin saw clearly that he could not control the Podracer on that turn. There was only one thing to do.

He shut off the nav computer to send the energy to the engines. He would have to rely on the Force.

Immediately the steering hummed with power again. He pushed the engines and in a burst of speed made the turn and cut Hekula off. He was in the lead again.

Slowing his speed just a fraction, he glanced in his rearview mirror. Hekula was going to attempt to pass him. Anakin would allow him to do so. He'd need to follow Hekula now. He had to let Hekula guide him to the finish line, then find a way to get ahead. His first objective was to protect the spectators, but Anakin had not forgotten for a moment that he meant to win.

Now he did not have to worry about injuring anyone. He had solved the problem of the steering. He just had to follow the

## Jude Watson

course. His comlink activated again, but it was on the floor of the Podracer. He could not bend down to retrieve it. He would lose precious seconds. Now Anakin was focused on only one thing: the need to win.

"I'm sure he is all right, but you might as well go to the finish line," Siri said when Anakin didn't answer. "I'll stay with Vista."

"Bring him to the Ruling Power," Obi-Wan said. He knew Anakin was all right. He had to believe he would feel it if it weren't so. "I'll contact you after Anakin finishes the race."

Maxo Vista smirked as Siri led him away. "Good luck!" he called cheerily to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan hurried out of the stadium. He would have to get to the finish line on a swoop or speeder. It would be the fastest way to travel.

Astri was waiting outside, her eyes searching the crowd anxiously. She waved at Obi-Wan and pointed to a speeder by her side.

"Is everything all right? Is Maxo Vista involved?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so. Siri is taking him to the Ruling Power," Obi-Wan said.

Astri handed him a small viewscreen. Obi-Wan could see the three Podracers roaring through the streets of Eusebus.

"They are selling these on the streets," she said. "Anakin seemed to have trouble, but he's in second place now."

Obi-Wan nodded, taking the viewscreen and jumping into the speeder.

She put her hand on the speeder for a moment. "Vista used Bog. Bog admired him."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Bog will be all right. He just needs to tell the truth."

Biting her lip, she nodded.

Obi-Wan took off. His comlink signaled, and he answered it.

"I have information for you on those Senators," Jocasta Nu said. "They aren't on a committee together. But they have all taken the same position on the same issue. The Commerce Guild



## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

is proposing legislation that would give them control of banking practices in the Core Worlds. It is an enormously profitable contract.”

“Do the Senators oppose it?”

“Of course. It’s a terrible idea to consolidate power that way,” Jocasta Nu answered. “Rumor has it that many have been bribed to support it. The vote will be close. But the list of Senators you gave me have sworn to block it.”

“Are the Ruling Power of Euceron involved?”

“No. But don’t you want to know who is a member of the Commerce Guild?”

“Maxo Vista?”

“Indeed,” Jocasta Nu said, sounding disappointed that Obi-Wan had guessed. “He was recently invited to join. Do you know who proposed his candidacy?”

“No, and I don’t have time to guess—”

“Liviani Sarno.”

Obi-Wan let out a breath. So his worst suspicions were true. The treachery had begun at the top. The Commerce Guild would do anything to ensure that the legislation would pass. As head of the Games Council, Liviani Sarno was in the perfect position to concoct a scheme to discredit the Senators who opposed it. Eager to join the Guild, no doubt Maxo Visto had agreed to take part.

No wonder Liviani Sarno had been so concerned about the theft of Bog’s speeder. She knew the information on Bog’s datapad could be traced back to her once the bets were discovered.

He ended the communication and concentrated on getting to the finish line as fast as he could. He would not feel easy until he saw Anakin cross the line, safe.

He contacted Siri. “Don’t let Liviani Sarno interfere,” he told her. “She may have been the one behind everything.”

“I haven’t seen her,” Siri said. “But Vista seems pleased about something. That must be it. He must think Sarno will save him.”

## Jude Watson

Obi-Wan returned to his piloting. He was almost at the caves now. It was strange how he had pulled a thread, and the plot had come undone. Didi's bet had led to a web of treachery. It never failed to surprise him, just a little, how far beings would go to advance their interests, how much they would risk for an easy gain. Together Liviani Sarno and Maxo Vista had wealth and prestige, yet it was not enough. And poor Aarno Dering, just a petty criminal with nothing to lose except his life. Obi-Wan thought back on his few possessions, his neat quarters. Dering was probably hoping to have enough credits to support himself for the rest of his life. No doubt he had taken pride in what he did. Obi-Wan thought back on the two chronos, set for morning. Dering must have been good at his job. He knew the importance of backup.

He knew the importance of backup.

Obi-Wan grabbed the screen and peered at it as he drove. Anakin was staying close to the rear of Hekula's Podracer. He tried to contact him on his comlink, but Anakin did not answer.

Answer it, Padawan. You know it is me.

Obi-Wan contacted Ry-Gaul. "Something else is going to happen to Anakin's Podracer," he said.

"The Force is still disturbed," Ry-Gaul agreed.

"Where are the most spectators?"

"At the finish line. I am there."

"That's where it will happen. I'll be there soon."

Obi-Wan pushed the engines to maximum. The boulevard ended and he zoomed along a dusty road, then over to the rolling hills. He remembered exactly where the cave entrance was and barely reduced speed as he crashed through the branches and slid into the tunnel.

He halted the speeder in the pit hangar. Groups of Pit Droids, mechanics, and members of the Podracing teams were crowded well clear of the finish line, viewscreens in hand. He spotted Doby and Deland.

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

“He’s still second,” Doby fretted. “He’s not going to win. And it looked like he almost crashed. I don’t understand this!”

“All we can do is wait,” Deland said, with a glance at his sister.

Sebulba had already called to Djulla to break out the food and drink for the celebration. He leaned over, watching his viewscreen avidly. “That’s my boy!” he cackled. “Smash them all!”

Ry-Gaul, Tru, and Ferus approached Obi-Wan.

“We can do nothing now,” Ry-Gaul said.

Obi-Wan scanned the crowd. Each being was staring intently at a viewscreen. Some crowded around one small screen, others shared with one or two friends. He had to be right. There had to be someone who would activate the backup system by hand.

One being sat alone. A plain brown robe swept down to the floor. A hood hid a face bent intently over a viewscreen. Then a hand moved to reach inside the robe toward a pocket. A datapad appeared. In that brief movement Obi-Wan glimpsed a robe underneath the plain brown cloak. The color was brilliant scarlet and the thick veda cloth was embroidered with orange septsilk thread.

Obi-Wan took off. He hurdled over some Pit Droids coiling a lubrication hose and avoided a disabled Podracer being wheeled into a transport. Startled gazes followed him as he rushed toward the seats.

The noise of the Podracers suddenly echoed through the caves. They were close. The spectators stood.

He knew, even as he ran, that he was too late. His throat constricted with pain.

Liviani Sarno touched the screen on her datapad, then slipped it back into a pocket. She quickly rose and jumped to the floor, hurrying away from the stands. She kept the viewscreen in front of her so she could keep her eye on the Podracers.

Obi-Wan took a quick look at his own viewscreen. They were close, racing now down a straightaway. There was one sharp turn

## Jude Watson

right before the spectator stands, and then a short distance to the finish line.

He strode forward and put his hand on Sarno's arm. She looked up at him, surprised and, for a moment, frightened.

"I'll take that datapad," he said.

"What are you doing?" Liviani hissed. "I am here undercover. I am observing. Go away."

"What did you just do?"

"Nothing," she said, her eyes on the screen as the Podracers raced down the last straightaway. She struggled to get away. "Let me go!"

"If you did nothing, why are you so afraid?" Obi-Wan asked. The Podracers approached the last curve. He kept his hand on her wrist.

"Let me go!" Liviani screamed, her eyes wide with fear.

It is up to you now, Anakin. I failed to stop her. I cannot help you. There is only the Living Force.

Anakin was on a straightaway, but he knew his steering had failed completely as soon as it happened. He knew his braking system had shorted as well. The warning lights stayed green. No red lights flashed. The Podracer did not wobble or shift. But the Force had gathered like a sudden storm cloud and filled his vision. He could see clearly and yet he knew the cloud was there.

This time the problem would not be easy to fix. It had not happened through the nav computer. He flipped switch after switch, but some kind of override had been programmed into his Podracer.

The turn was ahead. He was still hugging Hekula's tail. He had been preparing to make his move and pass him just before the turn. Now he knew he'd never make it. Instead, the Podracer would not turn. It would go out of control and crash into the stands.

He felt the Force around him and in him. In moments like this, Anakin felt capable of anything. The Force was like a gifted companion, a far-seeing guide, a power that gave his muscles

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

strength and his mind and heart vision and will. He felt at the center of the moving Force. Ready.

There was only one thing to do, and he knew it. He saw the steps ahead that he needed to take. He saw the difficulties and the odds. He even saw the possibility of his own death. It did not matter.

He made his move. He slammed himself against the side of the Podracer and pushed the engine so that he maneuvered close to the left side of the tunnel wall. Then he accelerated and came up neck and neck with Hekula on his right. Engines screaming, he was less than a centimeter from being smashed against the cave wall.

Hekula shot him an incredulous glance. It was as though Anakin was inside his mind. Hekula could take the opportunity to make one quick swipe, forcing him against the cave wall, and Anakin would be a fireball in seconds. But if Hekula did that, Neluenf, who was close behind them, would swing out to the right and no doubt win the race.

Revenge or victory? Anakin had bet on the answer.

Hekula did not turn his Podracer to sideswipe Anakin. Instead, he began the turn. Victory was too close for him to take the chance. Anakin's Podracer was so snug against Hekula's that it was forced to turn left as well. Sparks flew as his Podracer scraped along the wall.

The shell of the Podracer began to smoke. Anakin tasted smoke and fire in his mouth. He did not let up on his speed. If he did, he would be dead.

The spectators gasped as the two Podracers rounded the left curve, seemingly one connected beast. The flat straightaway was ahead, the finish line crowded with the Podracer teams and spectators who had risked the anger of Podracer security and jumped out of the stands.

And there was his Master, looking straight at him. The Podracer was barreling toward him at 600 kilometers an hour. And he had no brakes.

## Jude Watson

Anakin pushed the speed, passing Hekula. Then he cut the power and slammed all his weight to one side.

His Podracer began to spin. He crossed the finish line, spinning so wildly that neither Hekula or Neluenf could pass him.

The Podracer came to a slow stop. At first Anakin could not hear the cheers over the ringing in his ears.

He had won. And no one was dead.

Suddenly, he felt very tired. He saw the faces as a blur. Liviani Sarno, looking strangely pale. His Master, looking grave but relieved. And Sebulba, snarling at him, waving his arms and crying "Foul!"

Hot anger spilled through Anakin. He threw off his goggles and vaulted out of the Podracer.

"You!" he thundered at Hekula and Sebulba. "You're the cheats!"

Because of them, countless innocent beings might have been killed. Anakin had no doubt that Sebulba had been the one behind the sabotage of Deland's Podracer. They could not completely rely on getting the track information first. They had to destroy their closest rival. It was just like Sebulba to go that one, cruel step further.

The red mist he had come to recognize as rage filled his vision, driving out the memory of the clarity of the Force. He could see nothing but his rage against Sebulba, at anyone who would risk so many lives just to win.

"Slave boy! You have to cheat to win! There's no mother watching this time to disapprove!"

The taunting words filled his head and the red mist grew dense and hot.

He reached down for his lightsaber, but a strong hand closed over his.

"No, Padawan."

Obi-Wan's voice reached him as if from a long distance.

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

"He did it." Anakin struggled to keep the rage away. He pictured the red mist leaving him, floating over a distant hill. "He deserves to be punished."

"No." Obi-Wan's voice was stronger still. He drew Anakin away. "Listen to me, Padawan. Sebulba did not cheat. It was Doby and Deland."

Anakin blinked. He could not absorb the words. "It was..."

"They made a deal with Maxo Vista. They would have advance knowledge of the Podrace track. What they didn't know was that Vista was going to sabotage the Podracer. He wanted a fireball, a tremendous accident to occur."

"That means that...*I* was getting advance track information, not Hekula," Anakin said slowly. "It wasn't just the Force." That explained Hekula's sometimes puzzling failure to get ahead. He looked around. "Where are they?"

"They've disappeared with Djulla," Obi-Wan said. "I am sure they did it to save their sister. She has been freed, and they are gone. They most likely hid a transport nearby."

Sebulba was still watching him. Hekula sat slumped in his Podracer, too stunned to emerge. "You'll pay for this, slave boy!" Sebulba snarled.

Anakin took a step toward him but again his Master stopped him.

"He is my enemy," Anakin said.

"You are a Jedi," Obi-Wan told him. His voice was low and pitched only for Anakin. "You are a Jedi," he repeated.

The mist in Anakin's head cleared. He took a breath and looked around. Ferus Olin was watching him, as he always was, his dark eyes gleaming with secret knowledge, as if he had glimpsed the red mist that was Anakin's rage. Tru nodded at him, his expression showing only loyalty and affection. Ry-Gaul appeared to be guarding Liviani Sarno.

Nothing was as he thought it would be. He felt his legs trembling. He had almost lost control in front of his fellow Padawans and two Jedi Masters. He had come so close.

## **Jude Watson**

Obi-Wan's voice was gentle. "Come, Padawan. There is a mission to complete."



## Chapter Twenty-One

The hearing was presided over by Ruler Three, Ruler Six, and Ruler Seven. The entire Games Council was allowed to attend.

Obi-Wan was not allowed to hear the testimony before his. It was how hearings were conducted on Euceron. He watched Maxo Vista emerge, then Liviani Sarno, then Bog. At last he was called.

Obi-Wan laid out the details of what he had discovered. He accused Liviani Sarno and Maxo Vista of conspiring to disgrace the Senators in order for the Commerce Guild to pass legislation that would earn them fortunes beyond measure. He accused Maxo Vista specifically of the murder of Aarno Dering.

“Have you evidence of this?” Ruler Three asked.

“The files on Liviani Sarno’s and Maxo Vista’s datapads were timed to erase themselves,” Obi-Wan admitted. “And no one saw Maxo Vista run away from Dering but me.”

“Did you see his face?”

“No,” Obi-Wan said. “He wore a concealing helmet. Yet I knew it was him.”

“So we have only your word that the hero of Euceron and the illustrious head of the Games are guilty,” Ruler Three said.

“My word is all you need,” Obi-Wan answered.

## Jude Watson

“Perhaps on Coruscant,” Ruler Three said coolly. “But not on Euceron. You claim that the Podracer was programmed to crash into a crowd. But it did not crash.”

“Only thanks to the skill of my Padawan.”

“You claim Aarno Dering fixed three events, yet Aarno Dering is dead. Maxo Vista and Liviani Sarno have denied all charges. The Games Council has backed them up.”

“Didi Oddo can confirm the events were fixed—”

“He has left the planet.”

That was not a surprise. “Bog Divinian saw the files on Vista’s datapad,” Obi-Wan said.

“He has denied seeing them,” Ruler Seven said.

Obi-Wan remembered Bog’s sad notes on how to succeed. NEVER CONTRADICT A SUPERIOR!! FOLLOW THE POWER!! He had been foolish to imagine that Bog would not give in to pressure from Maxo and Liviani.

He gazed at the faces of the Council. None of them met his eyes. No one wanted the scandal to see the light. Not the Ruling Power, not the Games Council. And no doubt Bog Divinian had just ensured that he would be elected Senator on his homeworld. The Commerce Guild would see to that.

This is what the galaxy is becoming, *Obi-Wan thought with a sudden, sharp sadness*. Those with power hide the truth, and the weak go along in hopes they will become the strong.

“I can see there is no more I can do here,” Obi-Wan said. He strode off the platform and left the room.

Anakin was waiting. When he told him what had occurred, his Padawan was furious. “How can they do this? Maxo Vista and Liviani Sarno are guilty! And they are going to walk free! This is an injustice!” Anakin’s words echoed off the hard plastoid walls of the Grand Court.

“It is a hard thing to see happen,” Obi-Wan agreed. “But sometimes even when the mission is successful, justice is not done. It happens. At least the Commerce Guild did not get what

## STAR WARS: The Dangerous Games

they wanted. No spectators were killed and their legislation may be defeated by those they wished to disgrace.”

“And Aarno Dering? Maxo Vista will get away with murder!”

“That is the hardest of all,” Obi-Wan said.

They walked down the hall toward the exit. As they pushed through the heavy metal doors, they saw Astri waiting, leaning against the rail. She came toward them slowly.

“I am sorry, Obi-Wan,” Astri said. “I offered to testify, but I didn’t see the datapad myself, so the Ruling Power would not allow me. It was my word against Bog’s. Didi wanted to help, but Bog said he would press charges for the theft of the speeder. So Didi thought it best to leave the planet. You know he has no moral courage.” Astri shook her head. “I seem to have married a similar man. Bog isn’t bad. He was pressured by Liviani and he worships Maxo Vista. He swears to me that when he becomes Senator he will do good.”

Obi-Wan nodded sadly. “I’m sure he believes that, Astri. But he is already in debt before he starts. He has done a favor for the Commerce Guild, but he has lied in a hearing. So they have something on him. That will corrupt him.”

“I am frightened for my future,” Astri said, her dark eyes bleak. “But I have no choice but to go on.”

Obi-Wan touched her cheek. “Your loyalty is what drives you, Astri. I would not like to see you lose that.”

“So we are still friends?”

“We will always be friends.”

Astri nodded and slowly walked down the steps. Soon she was lost in the swirl of the crowd. Obi-Wan felt a sudden pang. Would he ever see her again?

“Nothing has turned out as I thought,” Anakin said. “I was here to work on my Jedi lesson of connection to the Living Force. If that is true, I’ve failed. I judged everyone wrong. I did not see that Doby and Deland were using me. I trusted my instincts, and they betrayed me.”

## Jude Watson

“Do not judge yourself so harshly, Padawan,” Obi-Wan said. “Your mistake was one of the heart. You allowed your emotion to cloud your instincts. You allowed what your heart *wanted* to be true to make it true. Connections to other beings, good and bad, must be pure and free of one’s own desires. You *wanted* Sebulba to be the culprit, so you made him one.”

“I thought my connection to the Living Force was clear, and it’s not at all,” Anakin said moodily. “I have such a long way to go.”

“If it makes you feel better, I made the same mistake with Maxo Vista,” Obi-Wan said. “Jedi lessons are learned by Masters as well as Padawans.”

“Wisdom comes with time and missions,” Anakin said, repeating Obi-Wan’s own words.

Obi-Wan smiled gently. “And mistakes,” he said.





**Book Four**  
**The Master of Disguise**





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# JEDI QUEST

BY JUDE WATSON

THE MASTER OF DISGUISE





# Chapter One

Civil war had raged on the planet Haariden for ten years, and even the ground showed the scars. It was pockmarked with deep holes left by laser cannonfire and grenade mortars. Ion mines had blown hip-deep craters into the roads. Along the sides of the pitted road, blackened fields burned down to stubble.

The Jedi had heard the explosions from cannonfire all afternoon, echoing off the bare hills. The battle was twenty kilometers away. The wind tore across the fields and whipped up the dirt on the road. It brought the smell of smoke and burning. The gritty sand and ash settled in the Jedi's hair and clothes. It was cold. A watery sun hid behind clouds stacked in thick, gray layers.

To Anakin Skywalker, it looked like something out of his nightmares. Visions of a world of devastation, where a cold wind numbed his face and fingers, and he trudged endlessly without arriving at his destination. He gave no outward sign of fatigue or discomfort, however. He was training to be a Jedi, and being a Jedi was all about focus. A Jedi did not notice the pelting grit, the razor-edge of the wind. A Jedi did not flinch when a proton torpedo's blast split the air. A Jedi focused on the mission.

But Anakin was not yet a Jedi Knight, merely a Padawan. So though his pace never flagged, his mind kept slipping away to

## Jude Watson

brood on his own discomfort. He was cold and hungry and there was a small pebble in his boot that was driving him crazy. The sky seemed to grow lower and lower, pressing on him. He would be glad when this mission was over and he was back in space again, shooting past bright stars.

He could take the cold and the danger and the empty stomach. But he had grown up on the Outer Rim planet of Tatooine, and he hated the sand. He hated swallowing and tasting it. He hated how it found every opening, every gap in his tunic and leggings. He hated how a stray speck always managed to lodge in his eye.

Ahead of him walked his Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, with another Jedi Knight, Soara Antana. The two Jedi kept their gazes sweeping the road ahead, alert for the telltale sheen of a life-form sensor half-buried in the dirt—a trigger for an ionite mine. Next to Anakin trudged Darra Thel-Tanis, a fellow Padawan.

He glanced sideways at Darra. Her bright copper and gold hair was dulled with dust. He could no longer tell the color of the bright ribbons she had woven through her slender Padawan braid. Her eyes were on the road ahead. Her pace hadn't lagged since they'd begun this mission. They had been walking for three days. She did not seem to register the fatigue Anakin was feeling.

She must have felt his eyes on her for she leaned closer to mutter under her breath.

"What I would give for a bath."

"And a cold glass of juma juice," Anakin added.

Darra sighed. "Whatever you do, don't say that again."

Anakin would have grinned, but he didn't want to get sand between his teeth.

Ahead Obi-Wan and Soara walked at the same steady pace. The focus of their concentration was complete. Not a stray pebble or slight disturbance in the dirt missed their notice. One wrong step and a mine could blow them into the leaden gray sky. Although Anakin and Darra had received some training in mine-

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

spotting at the Temple, there was nothing as good as experience to alert the unwary to the danger.

The Jedi had been called to Haariden on a mission to rescue five scientists who were on a Senate-sponsored mapping mission. They had been caught on the planet when hostilities suddenly erupted after a cease-fire. The scientists had been pinned down in the countryside. Unable to get to their space cruiser, they had sent an urgent distress signal to the Senate. The two forces on Haariden had agreed three times to a cease-fire in order to give the scientists safe passage, only to erupt into violence again before the scientists could get to their vessel and leave. Finally, the Senate had appealed to the Jedi for help.

It was feared that the scientists would be held as hostages or bargaining chips in the battle. Outsiders had not been welcome on Haariden, and the political climate was volatile. Each side thought the Senate was in league with the other—and thus all visitors were vulnerable to attack. Afraid of being captured, the scientists had moved from deserted village to deserted village, just ahead of the soldiers. The last communication the Jedi had received was three days ago. They could only hope that the scientists were still somewhere in the area. Time was running out. Roving patrols posed a constant danger. They had been walking since daybreak, searching one abandoned village after another. Some had been almost completely destroyed, others intact but eerily empty of life. The population had moved beyond the mountains and had set up refugee camps there.

“Tenuuri is ahead,” Soara said, consulting the map on her datapad. “Let’s hope we find them there.” She scanned the far distance, her keen gaze analyzing the puffs of smoke from the grenade mortars. “The battle is getting closer.”

“It will be dark in an hour,” Obi-Wan said. “That will be better for us.”

Soara grimaced. “Maybe. Haariden may be low on large-scale weapons, but they have plenty of nightscopes. They fight anywhere, anytime.”

## Jude Watson

Through the wind and dust, Anakin saw shapes ahead. Small buildings, built close to the ground. The village. On one side he saw trees stretching to the hills. The trees looked strange, and with a jolt he realized why. The trees had leaves. All of the trees he had seen since landing on Haariden had been bare, their branches blasted by battles fought weeks or days ago.

"After we find them, we can double back through the forest to the transport," Obi-Wan said. "We'll cut three kilometers off our route."

"At least they left some trees standing," Darra said. "I don't understand how two forces can destroy everything beautiful on their home planet and just keep on fighting. What is left to fight for? Have you ever seen anything like this?" she asked, waving at the ruined fields and deserted village ahead.

"Yes," Obi-Wan and Soara said together. They exchanged a glance full of a knowledge Anakin did not understand.

The shadows were long on the road now. They walked into the empty village. Heavy shelling had taken place here. None of the houses or businesses were intact. The wood had burned and the rocks lay in piles, some of them as tall as Obi-Wan.

If the scientists were here, they had hidden well. The Jedi did not want to call out. There was always a danger of snipers in this area—snipers who did not distinguish between visitors and enemies.

They searched methodically through the half-destroyed buildings. Anakin's heart grew heavy as he kicked through the debris of ordinary lives. A pot, battered and black. A boot. A scorched roll of bedding. A toy.

*There's not much to a life, when you think about it,* Anakin considered. As a boy on Tatooine he had longed for nice things, expensive things, for his mother. Once a space merchant had come through the slave hovels with fabric for sale. He remembered how Shmi's hand had lingered on a rich piece of cloth. He remembered the color, a luxurious ruby. He

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

remembered how it burned inside him that he was unable to buy it for her. How he had vowed that someday he would...

*I won't think of it. Focus.*

Darra stood frozen. She gazed down at a tiny crib. A scorched piece of linen trailed on the floor.

"Darra." Soara's usually brusque voice was soft. "Come along."

They moved through to the next house. It had suffered a direct hit. There was only rubble. Anakin could hear Darra's slow, even breaths beside him. He knew she was concentrating on her breath, slowing it down, trying to focus. Anakin also felt disturbed. It was as though his nightmare went on.

They walked back onto the street and stopped in front of the next building. Obi-Wan and Soara exchanged a glance. Anakin reached out to the Force. It always took him just a beat slower than Obi-Wan to feel it. The Living Force was here.

Obi-Wan headed left, Soara to the right. With a glance, they ordered their Padawans to follow.

Soara went first, headed through the doorway like shimmersilk. She was known for her grace and flowing movements. Obi-Wan followed, keeping to Soara's left. Anakin and Darra stepped through.

The building had once been a café. A long counter was charred and blackened. Some tables and chairs remained, but most had been splintered and blown apart. A very large round oven sat in the middle of the room, the size of a small landspeeder. It had been vented through the roof by a stone chimney. The chimney lay in ruins around them.

A rusty metal door swung on one hinge on the oven. Soara and Obi-Wan fanned out on either side, motioning to their Padawans to do the same.

Soara bent over and gently moved the oven door.

There was a muffled gasp. A small rustle of movement.

"Don't be afraid," Soara said. "We are Jedi."

## Jude Watson

“Prove it.” The voice was male and wobbled a bit, fear disguised as bravado.

In a movement so fast Anakin could have blinked and missed it, Soara unsheathed her lightsaber, activated it, and held up the glowing beam in front of the open oven door.

“Thank the stars and galaxies,” the voice breathed.

A face smeared with ashes poked out from the open door. “Needless to say, it is good to see you. I am Dr. Fort Turan. Space geologist. Head of the mission. Objective is the study of the effects of volcanic activity...” A shoulder poked out, and then an arm. “...on planetary atmospherics...*oof*...” Dr. Fort Turan tried to wiggle his ample body through the small space. “...within a scale three system.” The rest of Dr. Fort Turan popped out. Despite a torn tunic and a nasty scrape on one cheek, he beamed at the Jedi. “Now, meet my team.”

A blue-skinned arm poked out, followed by a face. “Joveh D’a Alin, at your service. Degree in tectonics with an emphasis on mineralogy.”

Joveh D’a Alin slid out. Another face appeared. It was another human male, this one smiling broadly. His hair was caked with dirt and stuck straight up, and his brown eyes were warm. “Dr. Tic Verdun. Practical theorist, planetary origins. Very glad to make your acquaintance. For a moment we feared we would be roasted alive.”

The next scientist to emerge was a Bothan named Reug Yucon, “special training in atmospherics, trans-system and galactic.” Then a slender Alderaan female named Talie Heathe, an oceanic specialist.

Dr. Fort Turan rubbed his hands together. “So. Shall we retire to your transport? The sooner we’re off this planet the better.”

“We can leave right away,” Obi-Wan said. “We’re about eight kilometers away.”

Dr. Fort Turan’s face fell. “Eight kilometers? So far?”

“You have speeders?” Reug Yucon asked.



## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

“No,” Obi-Wan said. “Speeders would attract too much attention. We have to walk.”

“That will take a long time,” Joveh D’a Alin said, concerned. “We had hoped...”

Tic Verdun looked at his fellow scientists. He tried to appear cheerful. “Not so far. And we have the protection of the Jedi now. It’s a fine night for a walk, I’d say.”

Talie Heathe picked up on Tic Verdun’s attempt to cheer them. “But let the Jedi lead, Tic. You’ve done enough for us.”

“Tic has saved our lives many times over,” Fort Turan said. “He’s scouted ahead and kept us moving away from the soldiers.”

“He did a good job,” Obi-Wan said. “You stayed alive. But the battle is close now. We’ll be walking in the opposite direction. We should be able to make good time.”

“We have provisions for you,” Soara said, reaching into her survival pack.

Quickly, the Jedi shared water and protein cubes with the scientists. They looked a little better when they had finished.

A pale pink moon was rising as they left the village and entered the forest. The shelling had stopped, and the area was eerily quiet. The faint hazy light of the moon barely penetrated the thick trees. They did not dare risk a glow rod.

They walked for several hours. Soara kept track of their progress with her datapad map. “We’re making good time,” she murmured to Obi-Wan. “Another kilometer and we can turn and head south.”

Anakin smelled the battle before he sensed it. He breathed in and smelled smoke and fire and death. Ahead, Obi-Wan and Soara had stopped. Darra drew a ragged breath.

The scientists had smelled and sensed nothing. They continued to walk until Obi-Wan held up a hand to stop them.

“Slowly,” he murmured.

They walked, making no sound. In a few minutes Anakin could see that the light through the trees ahead had changed

## Jude Watson

slightly. The smell was worse now. The wind brought it to him, and it smelled like something in a dark dream.

“The forest ahead,” Soara said. “It’s gone. Burned.”

“They must have fought closer than we’d thought,” Obi-Wan observed.

“Which means there could be patrols nearby.”

They exchanged a glance. “We have no choice,” Obi-Wan said.

“Padawans, we must surround the scientists,” Soara said. “Keep close and alert.”

They left the shelter of the trees. Around them were blackened stumps. A laserfight had taken place here. They hurried through the eerie landscape, the pink moon tinting the devastated forest with a rosy light that made everything seem even more dreamlike to Anakin.

There was no longer a path. They stumbled over branches and stumps. They kicked through spent shells. They were losing time. The scientists were exhausted. Their footsteps lagged.

Then Anakin felt what he had hoped not to feel on this long night: the dark side of the Force. It was around them, somewhere in the night. He knew Obi-Wan and Soara felt it, too. It took another minute for Darra to frown and place her hand on her lightsaber hilt.

“What—” she began, but the night suddenly exploded into spasms of light.

Anakin felt the impact of a shell hit him like a wall of air, and he went flying.

## Chapter Two

Anakin landed and tasted blood in his mouth. He had bit his tongue. He lay on his back, looking up at the black velvet sky and the pink moon.

“Everyone okay?” Obi-Wan shouted. The blast had knocked them all flat, but Obi-Wan and Soara were already back on their feet.

“Stay low!” Soara directed as the soft *wee-ooosh* of another airborne weapon came toward them.

Anakin cleared his head, jumped to his feet, and ran toward the scientists. He and Obi-Wan herded them toward the shelter of the fallen trees. They took cover as another shell exploded. Dirt fell like rain.

“Not again,” Joveh moaned, her head in her hands. She was shaking.

Tic Verdun put a hand on her shoulder. “Just a few bombs. Nothing too scary.”

She lifted her head and tried to smile. “Nothing I haven’t seen before.”

Soara and Darra were quickly taking readings. They hurried to crouch next to Obi-Wan and Anakin.

“They’re close,” Soara said. “Maybe half a kilometer away. Heading toward us. They must have a long-range bioscanner.”

## Jude Watson

"I'm picking up coded communications," Darra said, pointing to her comm sensor. "Lots of them. It's got to be a large force."

"Who are shooting first and asking questions later," Obi-Wan said, ducking as another blast shook the ground.

"Can you jam communications?" Obi-Wan asked her. "That's a start."

"I can try." Darra bent over her scanner and began pressing keys. In addition to being a superb fighter, she was an expert at communications.

"Half a kilometer," Obi-Wan repeated, thinking.

"And closing," Soara said.

"With this moon, they'll be using nightscopes and goggles."

"I agree," Soara said tersely.

Another explosion flashed. They felt the shock wave but it had landed clear of the area. The scientists exchanged concerned glances, but no one spoke again. They watched the Jedi, knowing that the only way out was to follow their lead.

"A Padawan—Master team, or should we do it?" Obi-Wan asked Soara.

She thought for a moment. Anakin didn't know what the two Masters were planning, but he knew one thing—he wanted to be in on the action.

"Got it," Darra said suddenly. "They're jammed for now, anyway." She glanced up at them, her expression taut. "They'll override the jam pretty soon."

Soara nodded, then turned to Obi-Wan. "We'll need all of us," she said. "It's too large an area."

"Yes." Obi-Wan turned to the scientists. "You must stay undercover. If we don't return in fifteen minutes, go back the way we came. Hide where you were before."

"You're leaving us?" Fort Turan asked.

"Not for long." Obi-Wan grabbed one of the extra survival packs they had brought on this mission. He motioned for Anakin to take one.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

“What will happen to us if you don’t come back?” Reug Yucon asked.

“We’ll come back,” Obi-Wan said.

“If you’ll come back, why did you tell us what to do if you don’t?” Joveh D’a Alin pointed out.

“Scientists. You’re so logical,” Obi-Wan said. “I said that for your own reassurance. We will be back. Come, Anakin.”

The four Jedi slipped off into the velvet night that was so suddenly and spectacularly lit by flashes of deadly light. Anakin could feel the Force gather around them. He did not often have the experience of feeling the combined Force of two powerful Jedi Knights as well as their Padawans. It made his vision sharper, his senses clearer. He knew where the explosions would come. He heard the faintest of *sss-sooop* noises when the grenade launcher fired. He could tell the direction without even thinking about it.

The Jedi headed straight into the advancing troops. Soara and Obi-Wan explained the plan. In the survival packs were luma grenades, projectiles that released particles of intense light. They would fan out along the advancing line and toss the grenades straight at the troops. Since the troops would be wearing night-vision goggles, the effect of the grenade would be doubled. A majority would be blinded for at least an hour. Plenty of time for the Jedi to lead the scientists to safety.

The difficulty would be to launch enough grenades amid what would no doubt be heavy firepower. The Jedi would have to work fast and keep continually on the move. They would also have to coordinate their efforts so that a wide area was covered.

Obi-Wan and Soara gave their directions in low voices. The Jedi fanned out. Anakin counted off the seconds, then lobbed his first grenade.

The night lit up like a flash from a nova. Anakin kept his eyes away from the light. He hadn’t expected so much illumination. Even with his Jedi training, it was hard to see. His eyes adjusted,

## Jude Watson

but he stumbled as he ran. He threw another grenade. Then, taking another leap, he threw a third.

He could see the troops clearly now. The front lines were kneeling, their hands over their eyes. The others were shooting blindly.

He dodged the fire and threw another grenade. He dashed to the rendezvous point, where Obi-Wan and Soara were waiting. Obi-Wan and Soara scanned the field as Darra ran up.

“The right flank,” Soara said.

The right flank was the area Anakin had been assigned.

“The lumas hit behind a wall. We need more cover there.”

“I have grenades left,” Darra said.

“Go.”

Darra didn’t pause. She ran off, already pulling the timer release on her luma grenades. The sky lit up in a series of flashes.

Anakin watched as Darra twisted, leaped, and rolled as she lobbed several grenades in a precise pattern designed to box in the troops. He saw where his grenades had missed. He had never seen the wall. He had become disoriented.

“Darra has the benefit of seeing the wall from this angle,” Obi-Wan said. “It would have been impossible to spot it from your position.”

Anakin’s face burned. It was kind of his Master to point that out. Still, he felt badly that another Padawan had to return to do his job.

“We’re done here. Let’s go.” Soara spoke and motioned to Darra at the same time. Darra leaped the final few meters and caught up to them as they ran back toward the scientists. The night was dark again, and there were only a few random explosions, hitting the ground far from them.

The scientists were standing, waiting for them. Without a word they joined the group and they hurried through the rest of the blackened forest.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

They jogged the first kilometer, then slowed to a fast walk. They had left the site of the battle behind, and the trees rose around them again.

“There’s a village ahead,” Soara said. “We should skirt it.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “We need the cover of the forest for as long as...” He stopped.

The two Jedi Masters exchanged a glance. Anakin felt the disturbance in the Force. It seemed to be coming from all around them.

“Down,” Obi-Wan said crisply to the scientists.

The Jedi all activated their lightsabers at the same time. They made a circle around the scientists and were ready as the patrol burst out of the trees.

The rebel Haaridens were armed with repeating blaster rifles. Some had wrist rockets. Anakin could see at a glance that the Jedi were outnumbered. And with the scientists to protect, it could get tricky.

The blaster fire was fast and it seemed to be everywhere at once. Anakin did not give another second of thought to the numbers against them. He focused so completely on the battle that everything else fell away but the movement of his lightsaber and his attention to where the blaster fire would strike next.

Smoke rose around them. The leaves began to scorch. Obi-Wan leaped to destroy a rocket headed straight for them. The midair explosion sent air thudding against Anakin’s eardrums.

The squad suddenly concentrated a third of their troops to the left and made a surprise strike close to Darra. Anakin saw it coming before she did. She was only a split second behind him, already turning to deflect the blast of fire. She had to pivot on her left leg, leaving her right side slightly exposed.

“I’ve got it!” Anakin shouted to her. He leaped forward, his lightsaber moving in a constant arc.

But Darra had already compensated for her move. She had shifted and turned, and the two Padawans collided. Darra was thrown to the side.

## Jude Watson

Blaster fire ripped into her leg. She gave a cry and fell, and her lightsaber went flying, lost in the confusion of bodies.

“Anakin, cover me!” Obi-Wan roared.

He leaped and scooped up Darra with one arm, keeping his lightsaber moving, deflecting the fire. Anakin jumped in front of them, desperate to help his Master. Soara herded the scientists closer together and, with a heroic effort, charged straight at the troops. Anakin leaped over the scientists to join her.

The fury of their attack caught the troops off guard as blaster fire ricocheted back into their ranks. Their line began to waver. Anakin and Soara pressed the advantage while Obi-Wan and Darra retreated with the scientists.

“They’re going to regroup,” Soara told Anakin. “Let’s go.”

They turned and ran after Obi-Wan and the scientists, who were dashing through the trees.

“The village,” Obi-Wan said to Soara. “We need cover now.”

Darra said nothing. She slumped against Obi-Wan, and he lifted her into his arms. Her eyes closed and her lips parted. Anakin felt a deep shudder go through him. She looked as though her life energy was draining away. And it was his fault.



## Chapter Three

*Get in and get out.* That was the goal of a rescue mission.

It never, in Obi-Wan's experience, worked out that way.

They had angered the Haariden patrol. Obviously the troops knew they were Jedi, but the Haaridens did not care. They were after revenge now.

Obi-Wan carried Darra along the twisting trail. They were close to the village and temporary safety. Every once in a while the patrol pursuing them would set off a rocket. It always fell short of their small band. But it was not a comfortable distance.

Obi-Wan remembered another world, another day. Qui-Gon carrying a desperately weakened Jedi Knight—his close friend Tahl. He remembered how Tahl's hand kept slipping off from around Qui-Gon's neck. *It is too late for me, my friend*, she had told him.

He had seen the refusal to accept the fact in Qui-Gon's eyes. At the time, as a Padawan, Obi-Wan had thought it impossible that a Jedi Knight could die.

Perhaps the first moment of his adulthood was the moment he had seen Qui-Gon's face when he realized that Tahl was dead.

*Why am I thinking about death?* Obi-Wan wondered.

It was this planet. Ever since he had landed on it he'd felt uneasy. The darkness here was more than a result of cloud cover.

## Jude Watson

It hung in the air. The Force dimmed with it. He knew it had affected his Padawan. Anakin was sensitive to the dark side of the Force. He felt it sooner and deeper than Obi-Wan had at his age.

Darra would be all right. A blaster wound to the leg was serious, but not life-threatening. Yet her limp body and her slip into unconsciousness worried him. There was a disturbance in her Living Force. He could feel it.

"The village is ahead," Soara said. He could see in her face that she, too, was worried about Darra. "They are not giving up."

"We must stop. Darra—"

"Yes. I must treat her."

The village had been large and prosperous. That was easy to see, even in the close darkness. Clouds covered the pale moon as they filed swiftly through the streets, looking for the best shelter they could find.

Soara and Obi-Wan chose a building packed in the middle of a crowded street. Thanks to a half-destroyed wall, they would have lookouts on all four sides. Yet there was enough shelter for Darra to stay warm.

They wrapped her in a thermal cape. Soara administered bacta to her wound.

"It doesn't look bad," Obi-Wan said.

A line appeared between Soara's eyebrows. "That is what worries me," she said in a low tone. "She should not be unconscious."

"Will you allow me?" Joveh D'a Alin spoke up gently. "I trained to be a medic before my scientific degree."

She came closer and bent to examine Darra. She touched her with gentle, expert hands.

"Without instruments it is hard to tell," she said. "It appears that she is in shock. Is it possible that the blaster bolts carried a chemical charge?"

"It is possible," Soara said. "It is what I feared."

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

Obi-Wan saw his Padawan swallow. Anakin's eyes looked dark in his pale face. Obi-Wan knew that his Padawan felt responsible. Anakin had leaped impulsively, not trusting Darra to evade the fire. As usual, his Padawan had thought that he was faster, stronger, than anyone else.

The problem was that it was often true. But not always.

"She needs care that we cannot give," Joveh D'a Alin said. Her gray eyes were compassionate. "But her vitals are still good. The bacta should help."

"We need to get her to the Temple," Soara said. She reached out and, with one finger, touched the dusty fabric in Darra's braid.

"Master, I will go," Anakin said.

Obi-Wan turned, distracted. "Go where?"

"To the Haaridens. I will negotiate a truce so that we can continue to the transport."

"What makes you think you will get within a hundred meters of a Haariden without being attacked?" Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin kept his gaze steady. "I am prepared to risk it."

Obi-Wan shook his head. "No. That is not the solution."

Soara joined them, closing her comlink. "I've contacted the Temple. They will pressure the Haaridens for a cease-fire. But it will take time. No one is sure who is in charge on either side. They are sending a medic to us, but it will take two days." She glanced at Darra. "What if it's too late? Can we risk moving her? Can we carry her to the transport? It's still kilometers away."

Obi-Wan had never seen Soara look so uncertain. If his Padawan had been lying so still and pale, he would have felt the same way.

Tic Verdun spoke up. "We can all take turns. We aren't as strong as the Jedi, but we won't let you down."

"Thank you," Soara said quietly.

"We have other options," Obi-Wan said. "I'll be back."

Anakin took a step toward him. "Do you need me, Master?"

## Jude Watson

“No.” Obi-Wan hurried away. He regretted the brusqueness of his answer immediately, but he would work quicker alone. He needed his own perceptions. And, although he didn’t like to admit it, he needed time alone to think of a way out of this. When he’d told Soara they had options, he’d meant it. He was sure they existed—he just didn’t know what they were. He did not think that carrying Darra over kilometers of rough terrain while being pursued by an attacking force was the best idea.

Obi-Wan shifted from shadow to shadow. He explored the village thoroughly. When he’d finished, he knew that the village had once had three bakeries. He knew who the mayor had been and that she’d had three children. He knew that the schoolteacher had driven a yellow speeder.

He just didn’t know what to do next.

He saw a faint light through the forest. He climbed to a higher vantage point and trained his electrobinoculars toward it.

The patrol was camping outside the village. No doubt they did not relish a night battle. They would attack at daybreak, he was sure. They knew that the small band was trapped.

Obi-Wan shook his head. He could hardly believe his eyes. It seemed such a short time ago that a world such as Haariden would respect the Jedi, or at least fear the Senate enough not to attack a rescue mission. Had the Senate’s power eroded this far? Had the galaxy ceased to respect the Jedi as well?

*You don’t need speculations. Just answers.*

He walked slowly back to the hiding place, hoping an answer would come to him on the way. He had hoped to find a small, forgotten cache of weapons. Some usable transport. But anything that had not been destroyed had been looted.

Obi-Wan stopped. *Not looted*, he suddenly realized. The village had not been looted. It did not bear the scars. It had undergone a siege. That he could tell. But the valuables hadn’t been stolen. They had been *removed*.

He retraced his steps. He combed through the buildings, now knowing exactly what he was looking for.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

It didn't take him long. He found the first tunnel opening in the closet of a prosperous house that was almost empty of furnishings. The opening was set into the floor of patterned wood panels. If he hadn't been looking for the seam, he would have stepped right over it. It was cleverly concealed in the design on the wood.

He lowered himself down into the tunnel. It had been clumsily dug, but it was reinforced well with plastoid tubing. He kept his bearings as he wandered through the underground walkways. There were several exits. One was in the back of the school. One in the clinic. And one opened out deep in the forest, on the other side of the Haariden camp. They were so close that Obi-Wan could clearly see the weariness in one soldier's face as he leaned over to unroll his bedding on the forest floor.

Obi-Wan returned to the others and beckoned to Soara. He explained what he had found.

"Should we evacuate now?" Soara asked, glancing at Darra. "We'll be taking a great risk if we try to sneak by the Haariden camp."

"Too great a risk, I fear," Obi-Wan said. "If it were just the four of us, it would be one thing. But we can't count on the scientists. They've been on the run for weeks. They're worn out. I think we need to strike an offense first. Now. They are settling down to sleep. It's the best time. If we can knock out their tracking devices and some weaponry, we'll be ahead."

Soara nodded. "You and I must go. We should leave Anakin here in case."

Obi-Wan nodded. He was glad Soara didn't hold Anakin's rash action during the battle against him.

But when he told his Padawan their plan, Anakin seemed crestfallen at not being included in the attack.

Obi-Wan felt exasperated. Anakin's reaction seemed that of a boy, anxious to be in on the action. It wasn't worthy of his Padawan. "This is important," he told him. "You need to protect the scientists and Darra. Soara and I won't be long."

## Jude Watson

"But you might need me," Anakin said. "It's a large patrol."

"We have surprise on our side. No, Padawan. You must remain here."

"I would not fail you this time," Anakin promised.

Obi-Wan saw it then, the hunger on Anakin's face. It was not a hunger for action. It was the need to redeem himself.

Obi-Wan spoke gently. "The best thing you can do for Darra is remain here to protect her."

Anakin looked down, struggling to accept the order. "As you wish, Master."

"You must keep your focus, young Padawan," Obi-Wan murmured, so that the others wouldn't overhear. "This is not a judgment on you. This is the best way to proceed."

Anakin nodded, keeping his eyes down. "All right," he muttered.

Obi-Wan hesitated. Now he could feel the shame behind Anakin's questions. His Padawan's feelings ran deep. His shame was filling him now, and he thought that only action could relieve it. He was wrong, but Obi-Wan would need time to explain why this was so.

He knew that his Padawan needed him. Yet he had to go. He struggled for words to leave behind, but he had none. The only thing left to do was walk away.

## Chapter Four

Anakin watched his Master walk away from him. There was no doubt or hesitation in how Obi-Wan moved. Ever. Anakin wanted to move through his own life with the same assurance. Yet time and again he found himself confronting miscalculation and error. Time and again he moved when he shouldn't have moved, said what he shouldn't have said, or turned when he should have stayed still.

It was times like this when his connection to the Force felt like a burden more than a gift. It pulsed around him so strongly and he could feel it so easily that he used it to act instead of to strategize. Obi-Wan had told him the Force must be used for caution and control as well as action. So far he had not learned that lesson. It was because he did not understand it. During the battle he had seen which way the blaster fire would come. He had exactly determined its movement and speed. But he had not factored in the notion that Darra would be moving, too.

If it had been a Temple exercise, it wouldn't have mattered. Darra would have perhaps received a bruise at most. She would have landed lightly on her feet, the way she always did, and turned to him with a quick retort and a smile. Instead, she was wounded and in shock.

## Jude Watson

Nothing had gone right on this planet, Anakin thought, almost angry now. He felt lost in a dark world, spinning in a system he did not know.

The scientists had rolled themselves into thermal blankets and were trying to catch a few hours of sleep in the corner. Through the half-demolished roof above, Anakin could see the cold night sky. The constellations were not familiar to him and made him feel even farther away from home.

He crossed the room and crouched by Darra. Her eyelashes cast shadows on her pale cheeks. There was a fine sheen of perspiration on her skin. He watched her breathe in and out.

*I'm sorry*, he spoke in his mind.

He felt a presence by his shoulder. The scientist Tic Verdun looked down at Darra. "It is hard to see a friend this way, I know."

"Yes," Anakin said. He did not want to discuss his feelings with this stranger.

"Yesterday I would have said that Jedi are used to pain and suffering and thus can bear it better than we do," Tic Verdun continued. "Today I find I would be wrong. You seem to feel it more."

"Not more," Anakin said. "It's just that we put ourselves in the way of danger. It is our path. We see one another's strength. We see one another at our best. So we know exactly how much we lose when one of us goes down. And we feel...if only we could have been the one to fall."

He felt Tic Verdun's eyes on him. "I saw that you wanted to go with your Master and Soara Antana. If you wish to follow them, I will take responsibility for Darra Thel-Tanis and the rest of us. The others are tired. I am still strong."

Anakin was impressed. No wonder Tic Verdun had been the group's scout. He had great courage.

Anakin shook his head. "I can't go. But thank you." He turned away again and sat down next to Darra. He didn't want to be rude, but he wasn't in the mood to talk.



## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

But Tic Verdun didn't get the hint. He sat down, too. "The Force," he said. "You have to see how it would be intriguing to a scientist. Something that cannot be seen, cannot be measured. And it can only be felt by a select few. Here I am with someone who can feel it and use it. I saw it happen just a short while ago. Can you explain how it works to me? Can you tell me anything at all?" He added hastily, "Or is it forbidden to speak of it?"

"It is not forbidden," Anakin said. "But it is not done."

Tic wrapped his arms around his knees. "I see."

Now Anakin was afraid he'd been rude. "It is hard to talk about it. It is something I can feel around me. Something I can gather and tap into, like a deep well. It sustains me and frustrates me—"

"Frustrates you?" Tic's dark eyes were alive, curious.

Anakin leaned back against the cold stone wall. He felt very tired. "Sometimes. It is so vast..."

"That you feel small." Tic gave a sad smile. "I study the galaxy. I know how that feels. How simple it is, and yet how intricate and complex. It is all around you and you are at the center of it, yet you are nothing compared to it."

"Yes," Anakin said. Tic had put into words what he had been feeling. No one had ever done that before. Not even Obi-Wan. Sometimes the Force made him feel...lonely.

"And you will never truly understand it," Tic added softly, "yet you will spend your life trying. And sometimes you ask yourself, is it worth it? Is it foolish of you to devote yourself to trying to know the unknowable?" He laughed. "All I know is, it can't be wise."

"Wisdom is not what we seek," Anakin said, repeating a Jedi saying. "Wisdom can only be found."

Tic shook his head, grinning. "Whatever that means. And I thought the scientific institute was hard."

When Tic smiled, Anakin realized that he was younger than he'd thought. He wasn't much older than Obi-Wan. Tic had

## Jude Watson

made him feel better, and he didn't think anyone was capable of that.

Suddenly the sound of explosions split the air. The scientists all jumped to their feet, fear on their faces. Darra stirred but did not wake.

"What is it?" Reug Yucon whispered the words harshly.

Anakin heard the sound of alarmed voices from the Haariden camp. Soara and Obi-Wan had begun their attack. Every muscle seemed to contract with the effort of staying still. He wanted so badly to go.

"Should we leave?" Joveh D'a Alin asked anxiously. "We could be trapped here."

"No," Anakin said. "We'll wait here."

Waiting was the hardest thing. Like him, the scientists wanted to move. But they wanted to run from the source of the explosions. He wanted to run toward them.

"We are lucky to have you with us," Tic said quietly.

*A small consolation*, Anakin thought. But he'd take it.

## Chapter Five

If any of the Haaridens were trying to grab some sleep, they were now disappointed. The patrol troops had been so certain that they were safe that they hadn't bothered to post guards. It was easy for Obi-Wan and Soara to sneak into the camp. The Haaridens had left the small arms jumbled together in a heap. Soara and Obi-Wan easily jammed the flechette launchers and the missile tube, and pocketed all the thermal detonators.

Then they tossed a detonator into the brush in order to wake everybody up. While the Haaridens scrambled for their blasters, the only weapons left to them, the Jedi stood, waiting.

Before the quickest Haariden could shoot, Obi-Wan called, "Think first. Surrender is your best option."

The Haariden captain spoke up, his blaster leveled at Obi-Wan's chest. "Why should we surrender? We are forty, and you are only two."

"I can think of one good reason," Obi-Wan said, holding up the thermal detonators. "We have ten of these. The blast radius is five meters for each. We can toss these accurately and quickly and demolish this entire patrol in exactly five seconds."

"You'll blow yourself up," the Haariden captain sneered.

Obi-Wan smiled. "I don't think so."

## Jude Watson

The next thing the captain knew, Obi-Wan had somersaulted over his head and landed on his other side. “Maybe I need to remind you,” Obi-Wan said. “We are Jedi.”

The other Haariden soldiers looked nervous. They glared at one another, then at their captain.

“I’m not inclined to find out if they can do it,” one soldier muttered.

“Why should we?” another said.

“This isn’t even our fight,” the first soldier added.

“Why can’t we just return to our unit?” another asked.

The captain eyed the thermal detonator in Soara’s hand, her thumb over the release.

“What happens to us?” he asked.

“We have no quarrel with you,” Obi-Wan said. “As long as we have safe passage to our transport.”

The captain paused. Then he slowly lowered his blaster.

Soara and Obi-Wan dropped the thermal detonators back into the pockets of their tunics.

“What do you mean, it’s not your fight?” Soara asked.

“We were paid to split off from our unit and attack you,” the captain said, wiping a weary hand across his forehead.

Soara and Obi-Wan exchanged a glance. “Who paid you?” Soara asked.

The captain looked evasive. “No one we knew. I mean, not a native Haariden. An outlander.”

“His name?”

“He didn’t say.”

“What did he look like?”

The captain was about to answer, but a blank look came over his face. He shook his head several times. “Isn’t that strange,” he said. “I honestly don’t remember.”

A pulse began to beat inside Obi-Wan. He gripped the hilt of his lightsaber.

“What is he to you?” Soara asked. “I would think you would rather have the Jedi on your side.”

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

The captain gave a sad smile. "The Jedi can't help us. We are perfectly capable of destroying ourselves. Yes, he gave me his name. It was Granta Omega."

The name only confirmed what Obi-Wan had already suspected. He had met Granta Omega before. Omega had hired a group of bounty hunters to hunt him down, as well as Anakin and another Jedi. Obi-Wan had still not found out why. He knew that Omega was not a Sith, but he collected Sith artifacts.

Omega was also a void, a person with enough power to appear so neutral as to fade from the memory of those who had met him. He did not have a Force-connection, but he had cunning. And for some reason, he despised the Jedi.

Obi-Wan was not surprised to run into Granta Omega again. But why here, and why now?

Suddenly the horizon lit up with a dull red glow.

"The battle has resumed," the captain said tiredly. "We should return to our unit." He hesitated. "Since you have spared our lives, I will also tell you this—all units have been called to the battle on the other edge of the forest. You will have no trouble reaching your transport safely. Our concerns now lie elsewhere." He bowed. "Captain Noq Welflet, at your service."

He looked at the soldiers, who had dropped back to the ground. Some of them sat, their heads in their hands. Others looked numbly around.

"My soldiers are exhausted," he said. "I took the credits from Granta in order to feed and clothe them. I did not want to fight the Jedi. I do not want to fight at all, actually." He made an attempt at a laugh, but began to cough. "My lungs are full of smoke and ashes," he murmured.

"Why do you continue?" Obi-Wan asked.

Captain Welflet's eyes were red-rimmed above his straggly beard. "Because I must."

Soara raised a hand to take in the exhausted patrol, the ruined village, the blackened stumps. "And it's worth all this? Your land ruined, your people dead?"

## Jude Watson

The captain sighed. "I only know there is no alternative."

Obi-Wan and Soara headed back to the others. They were both saddened by their experience on Haariden. There seemed little chance for peace.

They hurried back to the group and told the scientists the good news. They should reach the transport without incident.

"And the Haariden patrol?" Anakin asked.

"They've gone back to join the war," Obi-Wan said. "They won't bother us." He would tell Anakin about Granta Omega back at the Temple. Now they needed to focus on getting off-planet.

Soara and Obi-Wan fashioned a body sling and tied Darra gently against Obi-Wan's chest. They hiked to the transport, making good time now. The sky lightened and a pale sun rose as they reached the ship.

The scientists boarded with weary relief. Obi-Wan gently set Darra down on a sleep couch and covered her with a thermal blanket. Soara slid behind the controls. Obi-Wan contacted the Temple and said they were on their way.

They shot up into the upper atmosphere of Haariden. Obi-Wan looked down at the planet, glad to be leaving it. He wondered about the disturbance in the Force he had felt since he'd arrived. He had thought it was because of the dark side on this planet. There was so much death and bitterness. But what about his sense of foreboding? Could he have somehow picked up on the fact that Granta Omega was here as well?

The fact that Omega had failed in his attempt to kill the Jedi didn't matter. If Darra had not been ill, if he hadn't pledged to get the scientists to safety, he would have stayed with his Padawan and hunted down his attacker. Omega had tried to kill Jedi twice. He should be brought to justice.

But Obi-Wan had his duties, and he had to leave. He had made the same decision on Ragoon-6. Justice would have to be sought another time. Could it be that Omega only attacked when

## **STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise**

he knew the Jedi could not retaliate or pursue him? Did he count on a Jedi's sense of priorities to protect himself from reprisals?

Obi-Wan turned away from the planet and looked ahead at the galaxy. The ship shot into hyperspace, and a rush of stars seemed to crowd the windscreen. This time, Obi-Wan vowed, he would get to the bottom of the mystery of Granta Omega.

## Chapter Six

Obi-Wan accessed the door to the Jedi Temple Archive Library and stopped in the doorway. Usually it was a pristine space with not a holofile out of place. Busts of great Jedi Masters lined one wall, and the soft glow of computer panels created a hushed atmosphere. Today it was in chaos.

Holofiles hung in the air while datasheets littered the usually empty counters. Jedi archivist Madame Jocasta Nu stood in the center of the room, two laser pointers stuck haphazardly in her gray wispy bun. Her small, nimble fingers flicked through one holofile after another.

She looked up at him, irritated. "In or out, young Jedi."

It never failed. Madame Jocasta Nu could make him feel like a fifth-year student. She appeared frail but her authority was unquestionable.

She pulled out a laser pointer and frowned at it, then used it to make a correction in a file. "Well?"

Obi-Wan stepped inside. "Am I interrupting?"

"Of course you are. Cleaning day. I have to organize once a month. Retire old files, organize, send others to deep storage. Not a good day. It always puts me in a bad mood."

"Ah," Obi-Wan said, "well..."



## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

“Which doesn’t mean I’m not available,” she said crisply. “Just that you won’t get the benefit of my usual good humor.”

“Ah,” Obi-Wan said again. He had never enjoyed the benefit of Jocasta Nu’s good humor. Perhaps he’d been at the other end of her private amusement at his failure to keep up with Senate subcommittee agendas. That was the only time he could remember her smiling at him. It hadn’t been a very nice smile.

Jocasta Nu shook her head. “Oh, for star’s sake, Master Kenobi, stop repeating yourself. What do you need?”

“Some time ago I asked you to research someone called Granta Omega. You assembled a file—”

“I remember.”

“Which I need to review.”

She sighed. “Today, I suppose?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Jocasta Nu crossed the room and began to access a holofile directory. She hummed a tuneless melody while she tapped one finger on the counter. “Here we go. I can do a fresh search as well, if you like.”

“That would be helpful.”

She flipped through the file. “Though as I remember, this subject’s problem was decentralization.”

“What do you mean?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Scattered.” Her slender fingers wiggled. “Spread out. Diluted.”

“I understand what the word means, I just don’t—”

“Sorry. One of my own classification terms. Some subjects are solid. You can look them up, research, find out what you need. Some are diffuse. They are spread out so far they almost disappear.” She hummed under her breath. “This Omega was like that. Enormously wealthy, but no particular home. Many companies within companies within companies...many acquaintances, no friends. His business interests are galaxy-wide.” She sent the holofile spinning through the air toward Obi-Wan. “You have a file full of information that tells you nothing.”

## Jude Watson

*Just like his physical appearance*, Obi-Wan thought, stopping the file with a raised hand. The man hid behind a blank wall he created himself.

He looked through the file again. Omega specialized in ferreting out rare minerals and buying the whole source, then raising the price. He was enormously wealthy yet kept his wealth diversified and hidden in any number of secret accounts. There was no information that either Obi-Wan or Jocasta Nu had been able to find on his beginnings. They did not know his home planet. He just suddenly appeared, a wealthy man.

Obi-Wan looked through the list of his known homes. There were fifteen of them spread over the galaxy. Tracking him down would be extremely difficult and time-consuming.

He closed the file and sent it back to Jocasta Nu. "I doubt you'll find anything, but if you could do a new search..."

She nodded. "I'll get back to you."

Just then Yoda appeared in the doorway. "Find you here, I am not surprised. It is still Omega you seek?"

Obi-Wan walked out to join him in the hallway. "It seems he is almost impossible to find."

"Impossible, nothing is. Difficult, many things are. To you the question must be, why search?"

"I have a feeling," Obi-Wan said. "Maybe it is up to me to prevent something before it happens. I don't want to wait for disaster to overtake me."

Yoda nodded, his gray-blue eyes revealing nothing. "But an immediate threat Omega is not."

"The immediate threat is not always apparent."

"Argue with you I will not," Yoda said. "Your decision, this is. But think I do that you need a better reason to spend time on this. Heard I have that your Padawan needs you. Events on Haariden marked him, they have."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "He feels responsible for Darra's injury. She'll be fine, but she lost her lightsaber. He feels terrible about that. And I was not happy with his actions during the battle."

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

“Lightsaber skills, important they are,” Yoda said. “How to use as well as how not to use. When to move as well as when not to move. Restraint, your young Padawan needs, as well as direction.”

“I’ve spoken to him,” Obi-Wan said. “He listens. Yet I’ve come to see that Anakin really learns by doing. With every mission, he grows.”

“Yet sometimes one Knight is not enough to teach a Padawan,” Yoda said. He paused. Obi-Wan knew he had more to say. They moved down the hall, Yoda’s gimer stick tapping as he walked.

Yoda spoke as they reached the lift tube. “Hear I have that Soara Antana will remain at the Temple until Darra is better.”

“Yes, she will not leave her.”

“Not much she has to do, I think,” Yoda said. “Distraction, she needs.” The lift tube opened and he stepped in. He nodded at Obi-Wan as the doors slid closed.

Obi-Wan smiled. He saw what Yoda was suggesting. “I think I know a way to keep her busy,” he said to the closed doors.

## Chapter Seven

Anakin sat in the map room. He had activated dozens of holographic worlds at once. They swirled around him in their varied systems while dozens of voices told him facts about their climate, geography, species, and culture. The voices blended into an indistinguishable babble.

It was an exercise he had invented to calm his mind. He drew the Force around him to help him concentrate. Then he tried to find the thread of one voice and follow it. As soon as he had, he would add another. He thought of the voices as layers in his mind, and he tried to keep track of what each voice was telling him, all at the same time. It was difficult and took tremendous concentration. But all the voices together filled up the space in his head and drowned out his own voice, his own feelings. So he would not have to think, only concentrate.

*Concentration is different from thinking, his Master had told him. When you are concentrating hard enough, you shouldn't be thinking at all.*

It was here in the map room that he had first understood what Obi-Wan had meant.

He was concentrating so intently on separating the voices that he didn't hear Obi-Wan come in. His Master could move without making the smallest sound, but Anakin wanted to reach the point

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

where he always knew when Obi-Wan entered the room. He wasn't there yet.

Obi-Wan sat down beside him and waited for him to turn.

"A mission?" Anakin asked hopefully.

"No, we are at the Temple for a while," Obi-Wan said. "I haven't told you something I discovered on Haariden, something I told the Council about. That patrol was paid to attack us by Granta Omega."

Anakin felt the nerves inside his body tighten. He realized he had been waiting for this. He had wanted to pursue Omega after their experience on Ragoon-6.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"You had enough to think about."

Anakin knew that his Master meant his concern for Darra. He had haunted the med clinic until he knew she would fully recover.

"Are we going after him?" Anakin asked.

"Jocasta Nu is helping me do some research," Obi-Wan said. Anakin realized this wasn't quite an answer. "In the meantime," Obi-Wan continued, "I have something for you to do."

"I am ready, Master."

"I have arranged a private lightsaber tutorial for you with Soara Antana."

Anakin felt his heart fall. Shame filled him. "Because of what happened on Haariden."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "There is no blame, Padawan. Yet there are things you need to learn. Things that I have not been able to teach you."

"There is nothing you can't teach me, Master," Anakin argued. But the real reason for Anakin's disquiet was a secret fear that Obi-Wan planned to leave him behind while he went after Granta Omega. Obi-Wan would do the real work while he remained behind like a schoolboy, taking lessons.

"This is not your decision, Padawan." Obi-Wan's tone was sharp. "This is a great honor for you. Soara rarely takes individual

## Jude Watson

students. She would not agree if she didn't think you had great potential."

Anakin fought with his feelings. He did not want to confess to his Master that he was afraid Obi-Wan would leave him. "Yes, Master."

The stern lines of Obi-Wan's face relaxed into a smile at Anakin's obedient tone. "You might have fun."

Anakin looked at him with such disbelief that Obi-Wan's smile turned into a laugh.

Later that afternoon, Anakin tucked the training lightsaber into his belt with distaste. He felt like a young student again. He found himself tugging at his tunic to straighten it before walking into the practice area to meet Soara. Quickly he rumbled it again. He wasn't a student any longer. He was a Padawan Learner.

Soara didn't notice his rumpled tunic or his lack of enthusiasm. She nodded shortly at him. "Let's go."

"Go?" Anakin was puzzled. Lightsaber training had always taken place in the practice room.

She lifted a corner of her mouth in a small smile. "Do you expect there to be a practice room to fight in on missions?"

Anakin grinned. "I guess not." Maybe he would enjoy this after all.

Soara took him to the landing platform, where he jumped into an airspeeder next to her. Her piloting was as aggressive and graceful as her battle form. She took him to a part of Coruscant he'd never visited, a hundred levels or so below the Temple. Here, an entire quarter of the city was being knocked down in order to build new construction. Half-demolished buildings were surrounded by blocks of duracrete, bundles of durasteel cables, and towers of polished stone blocks.

Soara parked the speeder and slid out. Anakin jumped out after her and looked around. The work had stopped for the day. The buildings threw deep jagged shadows over the walkways.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

There had once been an attempt to keep the walkways clean of debris, but the sweeping had been half completed and footing was treacherous. He waited to see what Soara would do.

Soara did nothing. She picked her way over to a building and looked up at the frame being erected. "Housing," she said. "Coruscant always needs more housing. Amazing that people keep immigrating here. Do you know that building is the biggest industry on Coruscant?"

Was he here for an economics lesson? "I didn't know."

He tilted his head back to follow her gaze, following the durasteel frame of the building. Suddenly a shadow off to his left moved, and a figure leaped through the air toward him. Anakin saw a blaze of orange. A lightsaber! He just had time to jump back and fumble for his training lightsaber as he felt the sting of the blow against his forearm.

"Got ya," Tru Veld said, grinning. His friend had come at him from the high steel doorway behind him. He bounced back on his flexible legs and saluted Anakin with a lightsaber flourish. He, too, was using a training lightsaber—able to defend, but not to harm.

Confused, Anakin glanced at Soara, his lightsaber in his hand.

"Do you expect your attacker to announce himself?" she asked.

Tru came toward him again. Anakin somersaulted backward and then twisted to come at Tru from the left. He sliced the hem of Tru's tunic.

"Missed me," Tru said, dancing backward. His silver eyes gleamed. He was having fun.

Anakin reversed. His lightsaber hit Tru's. Smoke rose, and Anakin almost stumbled when Tru ducked and rushed at him, surprising him.

Tru might be having fun, but he was serious.

Anakin had barely missed being stung by Tru's blow. He emptied his mind of his surprise at Tru's appearance. He had to concentrate in order to gather in what he thought of as his battle

## Jude Watson

mind. His attention expanded to include everything around him. And yet his focus was now entirely on Tru. Everything he knew about Tru clicked in and became information he could use.

Tru was a Teevan, and thus his limbs were more flexible than Anakin's.

Tru never played a game he wasn't certain he would win.

Tru's left hand was stronger than his right.

Tru liked to choose the rhythm of the battle.

Anakin moved to confuse and unsettle his friend. He fought aggressively, then stepped back to lure Tru forward. He landed a blow on Tru's arm.

Normally, a Jedi Master would announce points when blows were struck. The winning blow would be to the neck. Soara did not. He knew she was watching, but he tried not to think about it. Still, he felt her circling, watching them from every angle.

Anakin used the ground. While he moved, he noticed everything—the cables, the blocks of stone, the tiniest pebble on the ground, the hydrospanner abandoned on the top of a block of duracrete. Someone's lunch bucket left on a grassy area by the walkway. He drove Tru steadily backward. Tru suddenly leaped high above and grabbed a pole with only his legs. On his backward swing, he struck out at Anakin.

It was a surprising move, and Anakin hadn't expected it. His eyes gleamed as he leaped to avoid Tru. Tru swung around the pole twice while Anakin dodged, wedged between a half-built wall and a deep pit. He slashed at Tru, who suddenly leaped off the pole and landed behind Anakin.

Perfect. Anakin whirled and drove Tru back onto the grass. Tru's foot hit the lunch bucket and he stumbled. His lightsaber was in his left hand from his twirl around the pole, and Anakin saw it wobble.

It was time for Anakin to move in with the killing blow, the sting of the training lightsaber. All he had to do was step forward and lightly touch Tru's neck.



## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

But he hated to win the battle based on a moment of awkwardness on Tru's part, even if he himself had engineered it. He would embarrass his friend in front of Soara Antana. Instead, he hesitated a fraction of a second, long enough for Tru to regain some sense of balance. Then they fought on.

The moon was rising and they were both drenched in sweat when Soara called a halt. "Let's call it a draw."

Anakin slipped the lightsaber into his belt, satisfied. He knew he had fought well. Tru brought out the best in him.

"You can go, Tru," Soara said. "Thank you."

Tru grinned at Anakin. "Good fight. See you back at the Temple."

Soara did not move. Anakin stood, breathing heavily, waiting for her critique. He knew a few places where he could have fought better. She would not say anything that would surprise him.

"I called it a draw, but you lost," Soara said. "And you lost in the worst sort of way."

Anakin looked at her with new attention, surprised. "What?"

"If you want to become great, you must fight without emotion," Soara said. "You obviously have not learned this. You must fight without anger, without fear, without rage. Without ego."

"Without ego? But—"

"No buts. Listen. On Haariden, you made the same mistake. Because you know Darra, you rushed in to protect her. Today you protected Tru. You think you are doing this as a mark of friendship. But you're really doing it to boost your own ego."

"My own *ego*?" Anakin was astonished.

Soara crossed her arms. "You know, Anakin, things will go a lot faster if you don't repeat everything I say. Yes, your own ego. You think you're a better fighter than your friends. You think you're faster. You think you need to go easy on them. Let me tell you something. You're not better. As a matter of fact, you're a good deal worse."

## Jude Watson

The words stung. Anakin felt his face grow hot. The evening wind was cool and drying his sweat.

Soara whirled and kicked backward at his hand. He did not even feel the blow, but his lightsaber was suddenly shooting out of his hand and clattering to the stone pavement.

“And another thing,” she said. “Never let down your guard.”

Anakin picked up the hilt of the lightsaber and stuck it in his belt. He vowed to himself that Soara Antana would not take him by surprise again. He would use what she gave him. He would absorb her hard words and her lessons. By the end of this tutorial, he would change her opinion about him. He would be the best Padawan she’d ever taught.

He slipped into the med clinic. The light tubes were powered down to a soft glow. He walked as quietly as he could to the side of Darra’s med couch. She looked small and helpless, still hooked up to monitoring machines. Her eyes were closed.

Her mouth curved into a smile. “Hello, Anakin,” she said without opening her eyes.

“I came to say good night. Are you feeling better?”

“Yes. Much.” She opened her eyes and glanced at him. “Better than you look, anyway. What have you been doing?”

“A private tutorial with your Master.”

She gave a sympathetic groan. “Ooh. Sorry.”

He crouched down so that they were at eye level. “She’s very tough.”

“The toughest.”

“But I can learn.”

“If you listen. She’ll push you hard, and then she’ll tell you something strange, something you don’t want to understand. That’s what she wants. The more tired you are, the emptier you are. That’s when she really starts to work.”

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

“Lucky me,” Anakin said with a grimace. “Look, I’m sorry about what happened on Haariden. She told me it was my ego. She was right.”

“It’s okay,” Darra said. “Now I have something to impress the younger kids with. I was wounded in battle.”

“I’m here to make you a promise,” Anakin said.

“Don’t,” Darra said, rising on her elbows. “I know what you’re going to say, and you can’t promise such a thing. Besides, I can get my lightsaber back myself.”

“But I’m the reason you lost it.”

“*I*m the reason I lost it,” Darra said firmly. “I’m the one who dropped it. Did you ever think it was your ego that wants to get it back?” Suddenly she slumped against the pillow. “Do me a favor. Don’t argue with me. I’m too tired.”

Anakin saw the exhaustion in her face she had tried to hide. “Is there anything I can do for you? Would you like some juice, or some food, or some music?”

Darra’s eyelids fluttered closed. “Just one thing,” she said. “Stay with me until I fall asleep. It’s lonely here.”

“I will.” Anakin shifted his weight so that he was sitting on the floor. He leaned against the sleep couch next to her head. He knew she could feel the pressure of his body, and that would make her feel safe. He sat there until her breathing slowed and he knew she was asleep.

“I promise you, Darra,” he whispered. “I will return your lightsaber to you. It is not my ego. It is my promise.”

## Chapter Eight

Obi-Wan hurried into the library. It had been restored to its usual pristine state. Jocasta Nu was at a datascreen, working.

“What is it?” she asked, looking up for a moment and then back down at her screen.

“You sent for *me*,” Obi-Wan said.

“Right.” Jocasta clicked off the screen. “I have good news and bad news. Good news—I found out Granta Omega’s listed birthplace. It’s Coruscant.”

“Coruscant?” Obi-Wan grew excited. That meant he could investigate a good deal of Omega’s background without leaving the planet. A being’s records were always stored on his or her home planet, and Coruscant was especially careful about storing every scrap of information. Thousands were employed in record-keeping.

Then he remembered Jocasta had said there was bad news as well. “And?”

“I can find no record of his birth. Nothing. And you know Coruscant is very organized about these things. So either he lied and was born somewhere else, or he lives under an assumed name.”

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

"In other words, we know nothing more," Obi-Wan said, sinking down in a chair. "Every time I think I have a lead, it disappears. I'm left with nothing."

Suddenly holofiles began to zoom from Jocasta's fingers toward him.

"What is this?" Obi-Wan said.

"You say you have nothing on Omega," she said. "I'm showing you differently."

"But I've already seen these. They don't say anything!"

"They say many things," Jocasta said, exasperated. "You just can't put the pieces together."

Obi-Wan almost smiled. Jocasta reminded him of Qui-Gon. What would his Master say if he were here?

Qui-Gon had always been better at research, at putting pieces together. He was always able to connect the dry facts with the living person. That would lead him to motives and reasons, and soon he would have a picture of what he was looking for.

*What is the emotion here? he would say. What does this being want more than anything? What does he need?*

*How am I supposed to know that, Qui-Gon?*

"Start with what you know for sure," Obi-Wan suddenly blurted. "That's what Qui-Gon always said."

Jocasta sniffed. "Exactly."

"I know he has a vendetta against the Jedi," Obi-Wan said. "He hates us. I know he was on Haariden." Obi-Wan straightened. "I know he was on Haariden!" he repeated. "And it couldn't have been because the Jedi were there. It would have been impossible for him to plan the attack beforehand."

"Not impossible," Jocasta corrected. "There is little that is impossible."

Now she sounded like Yoda. "But we received the summons and left within one hour," Obi-Wan said. "Improbable, then. No, I think he was on Haariden for another reason. When he discovered the Jedi were there, he saw a way to make trouble for us." He began to search randomly through the holofiles. "He

## Jude Watson

made his fortune by buying up minerals on different worlds and creating shortages,” he said. “We know that, too.”

“Let me get the file on Haariden,” Jocasta said. Her eyes were alight with interest now. She quickly accessed a file and began to flip through it. “Interesting. Do you know why the two factions on Haariden have been fighting this time?”

“Land disputes,” Obi-Wan said.

“Yes, but this isn’t about territory. It’s about what is *underneath* the land. Traces of titanite have been found.”

“Titanite? I don’t think I know it.”

“That’s because it’s extremely rare,” Jocasta said. “Not only that, it’s very hard to mine. It’s usually buried so deep near the core that it costs more to extract it than it is worth.”

“What is it used for?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Until recently, not much,” Jocasta said. “But in the last couple of years, it’s been discovered that when titanite is synthesized, a substance is extracted that is one of the essential ingredients of bacta.”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “Bacta...” He began to flip through the files in front of him. “Here it is. One of Omega’s vast land holdings is on the planet Thyferra. That’s the only place where the alazhi plant grows. Alazhi lotion is the main ingredient in bacta.”

“So if he had alazhi lotion and the titanite substance...” Jocasta said, her voice trailing off.

Obi-Wan and Jocasta stared at each other as the conclusion struck them.

“He could corner the galactic market on bacta,” Obi-Wan said.

“This is getting very interesting,” Jocasta murmured.

“When was the titanite found on Haariden?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Only a few months ago,” Jocasta said. “That’s why the fighting began again. It’s also one of the reasons the scientists were sent there. Haariden was included on the mapping expedition for precisely that reason. The Senate felt that if it had

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

a complete picture of where the titanite deposits were, it could persuade the two sides to come to an agreement.”

“Did the scientists make a final report?”

“Yes, but it was inconclusive. They couldn’t conduct the tests they needed to because the fighting moved too close.”

“Maybe Omega wanted that to happen,” Obi-Wan said. “Maybe he didn’t want the report to get back to the Senate.”

“He would need to make his own tests, then,” Jocasta said. “He’d need to have his own scientific team. That would be a hard thing to keep secret on Haariden.”

“Maybe he didn’t need a team,” Obi-Wan said. “Maybe he could do it himself.” He waved at the holofiles surrounding them. “Think about it. Look at what he’s done over the years. Look at the fact that he doesn’t employ many people at all. It would have been impossible for Omega to have done what he did in his career without some serious scientific knowledge. Which means,” he said, turning to Jocasta excitedly, “he would have to have had some serious study. Can you search the records of the finest scientific institutes in the galaxy?”

Jocasta raised an eyebrow. “All of them?”

Obi-Wan nodded.

“I’ll start with the Core Worlds,” she said with a sigh. “Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Obi-Wan was sipping a cup of tea in the Room of a Thousand Fountains and trying to calm his mind when his comlink signaled. It was Jocasta.

“He attended the All Science Research Academy on Yerphonia,” she said.

“Can we contact them?” Obi-Wan asked eagerly.

“I already have. He was granted his degree only seven years ago. He was a star student. His home world is a small moon called Nierport Seven.”

## **Jude Watson**

Obi-Wan knew the place. It was less than a day's travel from Coruscant.

Within an hour, he was on his way.



## Chapter Nine

“Again,” Soara said.

Anakin ran at the wall again. He no longer knew how many times he had done so. Fifty? Seventy? Two hundred, five hundred? His brain didn’t register numbers. There was just him and the wall.

He ran up the wall, flipped over into a backward somersault, and landed on his feet again. It was a basic Temple exercise. He’d learned it when he was nine. But with Soara he was discovering that it was a much more complex maneuver than he’d imagined. Apparently his shoulders were wrong. His landing was too hard. And the whole thing took too long for him to accomplish.

“Stop.” Soara’s voice cut through him like the cold wind that howled down the deserted alley straight to the secluded lot where they were training. The building in front of him was sheer durasteel, slippery now with morning dew. The sun was just rising.

“Close your eyes,” Soara said.

Anakin closed his eyes.

“Get rid of that impatience,” Soara said. “Now.”

Anakin tried to obey.

“Nothing is solid,” Soara said. “The hardest wall is just a connection of particles. Find the spaces between the particles,

## Jude Watson

and the wall will yield. It will push you off. Listen to the wall and hear the wind through the gaps.”

*Listen to the wall?* Anakin felt his impatience rise again.

He remembered Darra’s words. *She’ll push you hard, and then she’ll tell you something strange, something you don’t want to understand. That’s what she wants. The more tired you are, the emptier you are. That’s when she really starts to work.*

He listened to the wall. And then the sound of the wind changed. He heard the howl of it, but he also heard the whisper. He heard it stir a piece of trash on the street, disturb a pebble. And then he heard it whistle softly through the gaps. Nothing felt solid. Not the ground under his feet, not the buildings around him.

He felt the Force move, even though he hadn’t summoned it. He saw the wall in his mind, and this time, it shimmered. It wasn’t a solid thing. It would yield to him.

He ran at the wall. He ran easily, as if it were the first time. He felt the wall give against his boots. He pushed off and the wall sprang against him, helping him propel. He somersaulted and flew backward, landing lightly, gracefully, his lightsaber held at the ready.

He blinked. He had fought with the help of the Force before. But never like that.

He looked at Soara, amazed.

She didn’t smile or nod or show by even a flicker of an eyelash that she was pleased. But she didn’t correct him, and that meant something. Anakin made sure his own pleasure didn’t show on his face.

“That’s enough for today,” she said crisply.

Anakin deactivated his lightsaber. For the first time, he felt that he had glimpsed a future in which his connection to the Force and his lightsaber skills would be so meshed that he would truly be the best he could be. He could also see how far he was from that goal, but it didn’t bother him as it would have the day before. He would get there.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

They had walked to the training site, and Soara had already left for the Temple. She rarely said good-bye. Anakin looked down at his tunic and made a face. There was a ragged tear down the side, and it was stained with sweat and filth. He had already gone through five tunics since he'd begun training with Soara.

He started to trudge toward the lift tube that would bring him to the Senatorial level. From there he could take a series of connecting walkways to the Temple. It would be good to walk and see the morning bustle begin. He felt as though he had been facing nothing but a blank wall for hours.

Anakin grinned. He had.

Soara seemed to know every hidden corner of the seamier side of Coruscant. Over the past few days he'd climbed over junk heaps and through half-demolished buildings, crawled through tunnels, and even fought a battle with training droids in an airspeeder garage. He'd fallen into a vat of oil. That was a lesson he wouldn't forget.

Anakin zoomed up on the turbolift with a crowd of workers. At least he was too tired to dwell on his disappointment that Obi-Wan had left for Nierport Seven without him. His Master had assured him that he was going only for research purposes. When and if Obi-Wan decided to pursue Granta Omega, he would bring his Padawan with him. Obi-Wan had promised that.

Yet Anakin knew that Obi-Wan might run into surprises on Nierport Seven. He might find a clue he had to pursue immediately. He might not have time to send for Anakin. He could be left behind after all.

There was nothing he could do about it, however. The turbolift doors opened and Anakin stepped out, carried along with the crowd for a few steps until he broke away. The sun was rising now, the pink rays flashing on the cruisers in the space lanes and the buildings surrounding him.

He chose the least crowded walkway, the one that would bring him down the center of the fountains that lined one quadrant of the Senate complex. The coolness of the water

## Jude Watson

freshened the air. He felt the droplets hit his skin. His weariness lifted, and he began to think about the morning meal ahead of him at the Temple.

A man sat on the edge of the fountain, his face lifted toward the spray. Then he turned and saw Anakin and waved.

For a moment, Anakin couldn't place him. Then he realized it was Tic Verdun, one of the scientists from Haariden. Verdun was now dressed in a cloak made of deep blue veda cloth. He looked completely different from the weary scientist he had met on Haariden.

"I'm so glad to see you!" Tic said, hurrying toward Anakin. "At this exact moment I was thinking of you. I didn't want to be forward, but I was wishing I could go to the Temple and inquire about the young girl."

"Darra will be fine," Anakin said. "The blaster bolts carried a chemical compound, but the medics were able to find the antidote."

"That's good news," Tic said warmly. "I will see the others at the hearing, and they'll be happy to hear it, too. We've submitted our final report and now we have to answer questions from the committee." He sighed. "Too bad the expedition ended badly. We didn't get to do the experiments on Haariden that we hoped. We could have put a stop to that bloody civil war if we had."

"How?" Anakin asked.

"The two tribes are fighting over possible titanite deposits," Tic explained. "If we had found exactly where the titanite was and how much there was, the Senate might have been able to come up with a plan to divide it equally. Instead, the two tribes are fighting over something that might not even exist."

"That's too bad," Anakin said.

Tic nodded, discouraged. "The worst part of it is, there was another scientist on Haariden who was also conducting experiments. If we could talk to him, maybe he had found out more. But nobody can seem to locate him."

"Another scientist? Who?" Anakin asked.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

“Granta Omega,” Tic Verdun said. “We ran into him on Haariden.”

“You mean you know him?” Anakin asked, amazed.

Tic nodded. “Not well. But I’ve met him several times.” He noted the interest on Anakin’s face. “Why do you ask?”

“Because we’re looking for him,” Anakin said. “The Jedi would like to talk to him, too.”

“Popular fellow.” Tic frowned. “You know, I’m here on Coruscant with a group of friends. Some of them are scientists, some involved in business. We’re having a kind of reunion. Most of them know Omega, too. Or they’ve met him, at least. Maybe if we put our heads together, we could come up with a lead for you. There’s a chance we could know things you don’t know.”

“That wouldn’t be hard,” Anakin said ruefully. “We don’t know much.”

“I’ll talk to them and see if I can come up with anything,” Tic said. “They would be happy to help the Jedi, I am sure.”

Anakin agreed enthusiastically. He said good-bye to Tic and hurried toward the Temple. He wouldn’t contact Obi-Wan about this, he decided. Not yet. First he would compile information.

Wouldn’t it be amazing if he were to be the one to find Granta Omega?

## Chapter Ten

Nierport Seven was within the Core, but its desolation reminded Obi-Wan of an Outer Rim planet. It was a cold, barren moon with only one small settlement. Nierport's meager vegetation appeared to be a wild bush with red thorns well over a meter long. It was said the bushes bloomed with beautiful violet flowers in the summer, but the summer only lasted a month. The rest of the year was numbingly cold and bleak. The buildings were built with thick blocks of stone designed to keep out the cold wind.

Nierport Seven was one of seven moons in a small system that was notable only because it was a convenient refueling stop on the way to Coruscant. Most of the intragalactic travelers chose to refuel on the planet Eeropha, which at least had several small cities. But Nierport Seven was able to support a refueling stop of its own and a few small guesthouses, all serving the kind of pilots who could not afford to scrounge up even the low prices Eeropha charged.

At least the moon was small, Obi-Wan told himself. The population was clustered around the refueling station. It did not take him long to locate several people who had known Granta Omega.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

That was the good news. The bad news was that no one knew very much about him.

There was only one café on Nierport Seven, and it was next to the refueling station. The café was called Food and Drink, and the owner turned out to be as cut and dry as the title of his establishment.

"Never knew him personally. Heard of him. He left." That was all the owner had to say.

"Is there anyone else who would know him?" Obi-Wan asked. "Anybody who still lives here? He left seven years ago."

"Most folks leave in three years," the owner said. "Can't take any more."

Obi-Wan waited. He had learned this from Qui-Gon. Most beings would come up with additional information if you just stayed quiet.

"Might try that trio in the corner," the owner said gruffly. "They've stuck around. They were born here and they'll die here."

The three natives of Nierport sat around the table. They were wearing grease-stained clothes that told Obi-Wan they had just finished a shift at the refueling station.

Obi-Wan nodded a hello. They looked at him warily.

"Jedi?" one of them said. "Never seen your kind here."

Obi-Wan eyed their empty glasses. "Anyone for a refill?"

Their empty glasses were pushed away and they looked at him hopefully. Obi-Wan signaled for another round. "And I'll have the same," he told the bartender.

The drinks arrived. They clinked the smeared glasses.

Obi-Wan peered at the red liquid. "What is this?"

"Claing juice," one of the men said. "It's native to the system. We extract the juice from the thorns of the native bush."

Obi-Wan took a small sip. The juice seared his lips and tongue and then burned like blazing fire going down. He managed not to cough, but his eyes streamed tears.

The three men laughed uproariously.

## Jude Watson

“Claing can even bring a Jedi to his knees,” one of them chortled.

“I’ll say,” Obi-Wan choked out.

His streaming eyes and burning throat were worth it. He had passed a test. The trio decided to befriend him. He asked about Granta Omega, and they nodded.

“He was a boy when he left,” one said. “Went to study somewhere, I think. His mother Tura died two years later. He never came back to see her.”

“Not even for the funeral,” someone else said.

“What about his father?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Never knew him,” the first man said. “Tura Omega showed up one day, got a job at the refueling station, had this three-year-old boy. Nobody asks questions on Nierport Seven.”

“Except for Jedi,” another one said, and this caused them great amusement.

“I could show you his house,” the first man offered. He licked his lips. “I could use another claing, though.”

“I’ll buy you one afterward,” Obi-Wan said.

They walked out into the numbing cold. The ground was brittle with frost. They walked through the main street and then turned down a smaller road. It wasn’t far to the outskirts of the settlement. The man pointed to a small house. It looked no different from the others. It was built with rounded walls and seemed to hunch against the wind.

“That there is his house. A space pilot owns it now. Uses it on stopovers. Lots of pilots do that here. It’s cheap and convenient.”

Obi-Wan peered into the window. The house was empty except for a stove and a bedroll. The room was small and low-ceilinged. Even with furniture it would look bleak. There was nothing to see here. There was nothing to learn. It was typical of his search for Granta Omega.

“You said his mother worked at the refueling station?” Obi-Wan asked. “Did she have a good job?”



## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

The man laughed. "If you call hauling lubricant hoses around all day for no money a good job."

"So how did she manage to send her son to study off-planet?" Obi-Wan wondered.

"She had nothing to do with it," the man said. "The boy had brilliance. Everybody knew that. She found him a sponsor on Eeropha. He sent him to a scientific institute."

"Do you know who the sponsor was?" Obi-Wan asked. "Does he still live on Eeropha?"

"He lives on Coruscant now. Big fancy person now. He's the Senator from Eeropha. Name is Sano Sauro," the man said.

Obi-Wan felt a chill. He knew Sano Sauro. He was once a prosecutor. Ten years before, Obi-Wan had to undergo an investigation into a fellow Padawan's death. Sauro had grilled him mercilessly about Bruck Chun's fall.

Obi-Wan had since found peace about Bruck's death, but he wasn't looking forward to meeting up with Sauro again.

He pressed some credits in the man's hand. "Thank you. Buy your friends another claing."

The man grinned. "Sure you don't want to join us?"

Obi-Wan winced. "I don't think I'd survive."

The man took off. Obi-Wan looked down the street, then across the frozen wasteland. He could understand a boy wanting to leave this place. He could understand how poverty might mark him. But why Granta Omega wished harm on the Jedi, he still didn't know. He had a feeling that if he solved that mystery, he would find the man.

## Chapter Eleven

Anakin had expected that after his breakthrough his next practice session with Soara would bring him to the next level. Instead, she had him do more simple drills. At least this time he did not have to leave the Temple.

He had to activate his lightsaber from different positions, again and again. He had to practice a midair thrust. He had to practice a double reversal. He had to practice moves he had done a thousand times before.

Not once did Soara mention the spaces between particles, or concentration, or the Force. She just repeated, “Again,” over and over until he thought he would break his lightsaber hilt in two.

And then the session was finished. Anakin leaned over, trying to catch his breath. Disappointment swelled in him and he felt as though he were choking on it. After getting a glimpse of the fighter he could be, he was reduced to being a student again.

He slammed his training lightsaber back in his belt. What he needed was something to eat and a fresh tunic. He took the long way back to his quarters in order to compose himself.

The illumination banks were mimicking dusk as he passed by the lake. The green water looked inviting. The splash of the waterfall in the deep pool was tinted pink. He thought about taking a quick swim, but he was too hungry. Soara had kept him

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

a long time, and he had missed the midday meal. He had a feeling she had kept him deliberately. She wanted him to feel hungry and empty. She wanted to see how far he could push himself. He hoped he had passed the test.

Then he realized that his test was yet to come.

He was tired. So tired that he almost missed the blur at the corner of his vision. A lightsaber had been activated and someone hurled at him from a tree branch above. It was another one of Soara's sudden attacks. She had enlisted another Padawan to surprise him.

Anakin forgot his fatigue and jumped back just in time. To his dismay, he saw that his attacker was Ferus Olin.

If only it had been anyone else! Anakin didn't like to see Ferus under the best of circumstances. He certainly didn't want to fight him when he was tired and hungry.

Soara appeared on top of the waterfall where she could watch. He knew he had no choice. As Ferus came at him with a somersaulting reversal, Anakin kicked into fight mode. She had sent the best Padawan fighter in the Temple against him. She wanted to see what he would do.

He would win.

What Soara could not know was that this time, friendship would not gentle him. Not with Ferus.

Ferus was starting out slowly. He would fight smart. He would save his energy and pace himself. Anakin decided to surprise him.

He launched an assault so fierce that he saw Ferus's eyes flare with astonishment. Ferus retreated fast, needing to collect himself. Anakin came after him, swinging his training lightsaber without pause. He almost touched him, but Ferus twisted away just in time, turning the movement into a twisting leap. He surprised Anakin by immediately swinging back a backward blow. Anakin ducked, feeling the whistle of air created by the power of Ferus's swipe.

Ferus was tall and solid, but he was also agile.

## Jude Watson

He was expert at using the ground.

Unlike Tru, he used both hands equally well.

The rocky terrain was perfect for his style.

He jumped, spun, and leaped, keeping Anakin off guard. Now he was driving the battle. Anakin did not know how Ferus had regained the upper hand, but he wasn't happy about it. He was reacting to Ferus's moves instead of the other way around. What was Soara thinking?

Anakin feinted to his left and then leaped straight ahead. To his dismay, Ferus dropped to the floor and rolled underneath Anakin, then sprang up in one smooth movement. He was behind him now. Anakin had only a split second before he felt the touch of the lightsaber on his shoulder. It only just missed his neck. When he twisted away, he saw the gleam of triumph in Ferus's eyes.

Fury roared through him. Ferus wanted to humiliate him in front of Soara!

He did something Ferus would never expect him to do. He copied Ferus's move, dropping to his knees and rolling underneath him as he made his next leap. He flipped up onto his feet and then charged at the rock wall.

The Force entered him. He felt it. He saw the rock wall as a shifting shape, ready to receive him. He sprang off the wall and straight over Ferus's head. It seemed the easiest thing in the galaxy to simply lean down and touch the side of Ferus's neck with his lightsaber.

He landed and looked up. Soara had seen everything. He had never fought so well.

She called down from the cliff, "Thank you, Ferus. Stay there, Anakin."

"Good fight," Ferus said, sticking the training lightsaber in his belt. "Except for one thing."

"What one thing?" Anakin asked, irritated. He wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve.

Ferus only smiled. Then he walked off.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

Anakin jammed the lightsaber hilt into his belt. No one could get to him like Ferus could.

Soara walked toward him. "That was your last lesson," she said.

Anakin was surprised and pleased. She must have seen how seamlessly he had connected with the Force.

"Before this, I had been impressed with your gifts," Soara said. "I had thought you had the potential to be one of the great Jedi fighters of all time. I thought I could teach you. Now I have grave doubts about you, Anakin."

Anakin couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What did I do wrong?"

"That question is the problem," Soara said, shaking her head. "That is what is wrong. You don't know what you did. Didn't you feel your anger, Anakin? Didn't you realize it was fueling the battle?"

"Obi-Wan told you that Ferus and I do not get along," Anakin said sullenly.

"Obi-Wan didn't need to tell me," Soara snapped. "I saw it. Not from Ferus. From you."

"He wanted to win," Anakin said. "I saw triumph in his eyes when he surprised me."

"And it made you angry." Soara sighed. "Ferus did not fight from his emotion, Anakin. If you saw triumph in his eyes, he absorbed it and went on. That is the lesson you must learn. You will feel the emotion. You must let it go."

To his surprise, she suddenly strode forward and grabbed him by the shoulders. "You must do this, Anakin. You must learn this lesson. It is the most important one of all."

He didn't know what to say. He could promise her that he would learn it, but his promise would mean nothing. He knew that as a Jedi only his actions would convince her.

"Thank you for the time you devoted to teaching me," he said.

## **Jude Watson**

She dropped her hands. Now sadness was in her eyes. That was the worst thing of all. “Go get something to eat.”

Soara left, heading for the turbolift. Anakin walked over to the lake. He knelt by the deep pool created by the waterfall. He ducked his head into the cold water and came up spraying droplets that shined like bright gems in the light created by the illumination banks overhead.

He would not let this bother him, he told himself fiercely. He had made a mistake. Soara should have understood that. He was a Padawan, not a Jedi. Of course he would make mistakes. It wasn’t fair.

She said she had her doubts that he would make a great Jedi. Yet she had seen the potential for it. He would surprise her. He would surprise them all.

He rose and headed away from the lake. He would start by surprising Obi-Wan. Thanks to Tic Verdun, he would locate Granta Omega.

## Chapter Twelve

Upon his return to Coruscant, Obi-Wan didn't stop at the Temple, but went right to the Senate. He paused inside the massive grand hall and accessed the directional system. He entered Sano Sauro's name and a map instantly appeared, highlighting the quickest route to his office. He would have to snake through several wings of the Senate complex. The system would print out a map on a durasheet, but Obi-Wan didn't need it. He memorized the route and took off.

Ever since he'd come here as a Jedi student, he had seen a Senate bustling with beings from all over the galaxy, but lately the halls had seemed even more crowded. The Senators' staffs were bloated with consorts, advisors, clerks, secretaries, assistants, and droids. Committees and subcommittees were tied up in hearings that stretched on for months, and sometimes years. Obi-Wan had always found Senators to admire for their dedication, but it was getting harder. The Senate continued to legislate, but it took more and more effort and time to get the smallest things done. Coalitions were formed, favors traded, credits amassed. Betrayals caused grudges that resulted in deep rifts that lasted for years. It was a different place than he had known.

Yet he continued to serve it. He did not think it was possible to have peace in the galaxy without it.

## Jude Watson

What kind of Senator was Sano Sauro? He did not want to make judgments before meeting him again. He had not seen him in ten years. Beings changed with time. He had known an ambitious lawyer who had attacked the Jedi and mocked the Force. Perhaps Sauro had found peace in a life of service. Obi-Wan would not expect trouble. He would hope for the best.

Still, he was uncomfortably aware of how deeply Sano Sauro had unnerved him as a young Padawan. The man's reserve had been icy. He did not seem to be able to speak without a sneer. Obi-Wan had felt that whatever he said to the prosecutor was wrong or foolish. He was a Jedi Knight now, and not easily intimidated. It would be interesting to see what the encounter would be like if Sano Sauro had not changed.

Obi-Wan reached the offices of Sano Sauro and strode inside. A team of assistants worked busily at their desks. An ornate carved door led to an inner office. Obi-Wan told the receptionist his name and requested a few minutes of the Senator's time. He wondered if Sano Sauro would remember him.

He did not have to wonder long. The door hissed open and Sauro stood in the doorway. He looked oddly the same. He still had the same unlined face, the skin smooth and stretched tightly over the bones. His hair was still jet black. He could even have been dressed in the same clothes, a long black tunic and trousers. Obi-Wan could see small evidence of vanity in his brightly shined expensive boots.

"Obi-Wan Kenobi," he said through tight lips. "Don't tell me you've killed another Padawan."

He had not changed at all.

Obi-Wan was glad to note that Sano Sauro's words had not made even the slightest impression on him. He did not feel stung. He did not care what such a man thought of him. The opinion of a cruel man was worth less than nothing.

"I come on another matter and would welcome your help," Obi-Wan said.



## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

Sano Sauro stepped aside. Obi-Wan took this as an invitation to enter the office. The door hissed shut behind him.

Sano Sauro sat behind a long, low desk built of stone. Two massive red thorns marked the corners. Obi-Wan recognized them from the clāing bush.

Sauro said nothing but waited for him to begin. Obi-Wan remembered that, too. The prosecutor had never wasted time on pleasantries.

"I am trying to locate a protégé of yours called Granta Omega," Obi-Wan said. He waited to see if Sano Sauro would react to the name, but he did not. "Do you still know him?"

"He is a personal friend," Sano Sauro said.

"Can you tell me how I could contact him?"

"Why?"

"In connection with a Jedi matter," Obi-Wan said.

"Why would I give you any information?" Sano Sauro asked.

Now it was Obi-Wan's turn to say nothing. The rudeness was not unexpected.

"Because you ask?" Sauro said, folding his hands in front of him. "Because you are a Jedi?"

"Because there is no reason not to," Obi-Wan said. "And if there is, I would be interested in uncovering it. I would expect that an investigation into the reason would not please you."

"How interesting it must be to be a Jedi," Sano Sauro said. "You can bully and threaten and yet hide behind your robes and your talk of justice and the Force. Very convenient."

"I am not threatening you," Obi-Wan said evenly. "I asked you a legitimate question, which you refused to answer. I am interested in why."

"In that case, let me save you time. I am refusing to answer because I do not help the Jedi. It is as simple as that. The Senate in its collective delusion thinks we need you. I do not."

The door hissed open behind Obi-Wan. Sauro rose.

"I think I have come to the end of my patience," he said. "Good-bye."

## Jude Watson

The hatred in his gaze was no longer surprising to Obi-Wan. Sano Sauro had hated the Jedi ten years before and still hated them.

He could go over Sano Sauro's head. He could get the Jedi Council involved. They could go to Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. It was something to consider. If Granta Omega was planning to corner the market on bacta, the Chancellor would want to know.

Obi-Wan walked out of the inner office. The door hissed shut behind him. The assistants did not even glance at him. They sat hunched over their datascreens or talking on comlinks.

The assistant closest to Sauro's inner office was distractedly speaking on a comlink while entering data into a datapad. "No, we're not releasing copies," he said. "The expedition was cut short and the report was inconclusive. Senator Sauro has been thoroughly briefed. No, I won't put you through. Check with the Senate archivist, the Senator doesn't have time." The assistant cut the connection. "Journalists," he muttered.

"Was Senator Sauro on the committee that oversaw the mapping expedition that ended on Haariden?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Senator Sauro *headed* the committee," the assistant said haughtily.

Obi-Wan hurried from the room. He headed straight to the Senate archives, where committee records were kept. He filled out a request and waited impatiently until the information flashed onto his screen.

Obi-Wan's least favorite thing to do was wade through the minutes of Senatorial committee meetings. But he leaned forward, quickly scanning the report with interest. The decision to fund the mapping expedition took endless debate. Then names of scientists were submitted and debated. At last the team was decided on. Obi-Wan read the names and qualifications. Dr. Fort Turan. Joveh D'a Alin. Reug Yucon. Talie Heathe. And finally, Tic Verdun. He had been added at the last minute on the suggestion of the committee head, Senator Sauro...

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

Obi-Wan remembered something Talie Heathe had said on Haariden. Tic had been the scout. That meant he had been able to get away from the group for hours at a time.

Obi-Wan scanned Verdun's qualifications. He had graduated from the same scientific institute in the same year as Granta Omega.

He activated his comlink and contacted Jocasta Nu at the Temple.

"Please run a text doc identification search on Tic Verdun," he said.

He switched off the screen and hurried out of the archive room. He knew Jocasta Nu would not take long to answer him. He started back toward the Temple. By the time he reached the front doors, Jocasta Nu had signaled him.

"Interesting," Jocasta Nu said. "I just did a preliminary search, you understand. But the only information I can find is that he recently served on a Senatorial expedition to Haariden—"

"I know that. I met him there, remember?"

"And his credentials don't check out at all. If I had to guess, I'd say this was an alias. Strange that the Senate committee didn't pick it up."

"Not if the head of the Senate committee was his sponsor."

"Ah. Yes. There's a strange coincidence, though. He is listed as having a degree from the same school that—"

"—Granta Omega attended," Obi-Wan interrupted. Jocasta had told him everything he needed to know, which was nothing.

And now he knew that Tic Verdun was Granta Omega. He had met Omega on Ragoon-6. He had met a man whose face was disfigured with synth-flesh. His eyes had been gray. Obi-Wan could not connect that memory with Tic Verdun, with his shock of dark hair and his youthful face. Yet he was positive the two men were the same.

He stepped onto the lift tube and went straight to Anakin's quarters, but Anakin wasn't there. Obi-Wan tracked down Soara Antana, who was visiting Darra in the med center.

## **Jude Watson**

“Do you know where Anakin is?” he asked her.

“We had our practice session this morning,” she said. “Then he headed off for an appointment. Do you remember Tic Verdun? Anakin went to meet him.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Anakin was starting to feel better. He had tried to tell himself that Soara had not been fair to him, but in truth, her words had shaken him. He had looked into her eyes and seen great disappointment there. He could tell himself that he would prove her wrong, but the loss of her respect was a blow. And what would she tell his Master?

He had worried about these things all the way to the meeting with Tic Verdun, but now they had shrunk to vague feelings at the back of his mind. He was too caught up in meeting Tic's friends and hearing what they had to say about Granta Omega. Already he had collected a number of facts about the elusive businessman. If he could manage to put the pieces together, he and Obi-Wan would have a place to start.

Tic's friends were all funny and smart. They had welcomed Anakin and seemed impressed at meeting "our first Jedi!" They poured him tea and sat around trying to prod their memories for facts about Granta Omega. They interrupted one another and corrected one another. But nobody interrupted Tic, Anakin noted. They all deferred to him, but in a way that Anakin could see was out of great respect.

Anakin was especially impressed with a young scientist named Mellora Falon. She had just graduated from an elite scientific

## Jude Watson

institution even though she was only a few years older than Anakin. She had met Granta Omega on an expedition to the planet Uriek, and gave the most detailed account of him.

“He had a weakness for pastry,” she said, smiling. “The really sweet, sticky kind. He ate an entire plate of sweesonberry rolls.”

Tic Verdun shook his head. “Glad to see you noted the important things.”

But everything was important. Anakin knew that. He could take that information back to Jocasta Nu and in about thirty seconds she could tell him every planet where the sweesonberries grew, and could give him a list of the best pastry makers in the Core Worlds.

“I just remembered something,” Mellora said. “That morning, he said his favorite house was surrounded by sweesonberry bushes. He goes there for vacations. It’s near the sea, too.”

More information for Jocasta Nu. Anakin took another sip of the excellent tea Mellora had brewed. He felt warm and comfortable. Night had fallen, and the stars twinkled like hard points outside in the cold night. He thought about reaching for another piece of fruit, but he felt too lazy.

Just at the very moment he settled into his contentment, he felt a warning. There was a disturbance in the Force here. He realized that it had been there for some time. Anakin felt slow surprise trickle through him.

Here? But he was among friends. Perhaps he was confused. Perhaps he was wrong. Soara had showed him that his connection to the Force was not as clear as he’d once supposed.

He tried to focus on his feelings, but they seemed to run off his body like water. He blinked several times and realized he was sleepy. He had to struggle to stay awake. Mellora was speaking again, and he had to focus in order to hear her. Had his fight with Ferus tired him out so?

“...more tea? No, I don’t think you should.” She laughed, her red lips parting. Her dark hair was as sleek as the pelt of a water animal.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

"Anakin?" Tic's face seemed to loom in front of him. He patted Anakin's arm gently. "Are you all right? I have to tell you something. Are you listening?"

Anakin focused on Tic. "Yes?"

"Everything we told you about Granta Omega is a lie," Tic said, still smiling.

Anakin struggled to understand his meaning. "I...don't...understand."

"Oh, don't worry. You will."

"But we do have something to show you," Mellora said. "Something he owns." From beneath the folds of her white tunic she brought out a small pyramid. "Omega gave me this."

It was a Sith artifact. Now Anakin knew the origin of the disturbance he had detected. It grew stronger, and he felt nausea rise in his throat. He tried to sit up, but the chair now seemed to hold him down.

Mellora turned the cube in her hands. "At first I found the images disturbing. But Granta talked to me about them. Power can be disturbing. That's where its beauty lies. Do you understand?"

Anakin's tongue felt thick. "No." He had been so foolish. So incredibly foolish and naïve. He saw the mug on the table in front of him. He had drained every drop. He wasn't tired. He was drugged.

"Don't worry, we didn't poison you," Tic said. "It's because we have respect for the Jedi that we did this. We know it's the only way to slow you down."

Tic's voice had not changed. He still sounded friendly and warm. "We've immobilized you in order to talk to you. We don't wish to harm you."

"We only wish to discuss the Force," Mellora said.

The other faces turned to him. Now their bright interest, he saw, was not interest at all. It was not so simple. It was greed. They were ravenous for information about him. He had thought

## Jude Watson

he was learning from them, but all the time, they were studying him.

“Mellora and I are the only scientists here,” Tic said. “I’m afraid I lied to you about my friends. We are simply a group of ordinary beings who are interested in the extraordinary. We have a common interest in the Force.”

“We wanted to find a Force-sensitive being to talk to about it,” Mellora said.

In other words, Anakin thought, they were a Sith cult. No matter how friendly they seemed. No matter how much they wanted him to think they were harmless. He had tangled with a Sith cult before. Although they weren’t Force-sensitive, they were drawn to the dark side and they could be dangerous.

But why Tic Verdun? He was a respected scientist.

*And how do you know that? You don’t know anything about him except that you liked him.*

Anakin thought back to the mission on Haariden. He had liked Tic because Tic had seemed to understand him. He had been the bravest of the scientists, too. He had been the one to go off and scout for patrols. He had risked his life, they said...

He had been gone for hours, they said...

“Do you understand?” Tic asked him softly. “Do you, Anakin Skywalker?”

“You are Granta Omega,” he said.

“Very good.” Tic turned to the others, pleased. “You see how his mind continues to work? On an ordinary being, that drug would immobilize his thoughts as well as his legs.”

Anakin thought about trying to rise. He thought he would have enough strength to reach the door. He had not begun to tap into the Force yet.

*Wait.* That’s what Obi-Wan would say. He had enough strength for one try. He knew that. And if he had enough strength for only that, he had better plan it.

“Back on Haariden, you said the Force frustrates you,” Tic said.



## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

*No. I spoke hastily. It was because of what happened with Darra.* But Anakin said nothing. He did not want to have a conversation with Tic. Omega. He found it unnerving to see the same friendly look in his bright eyes, the good humor on his face.

"That interested me," Omega said. "I thought, this Jedi is different. He recognizes not only what power is, but what it isn't. What it can be. Power is...protection. It is what stands between you and losing what you have. I'm not talking about material things, either. I'm talking about...everything."

Anakin didn't understand. But then, he didn't want to.

Tic leaned forward. His warm eyes met Anakin's.

*Not Tic. Granta Omega. He is not your friend.*

The words Tic and Omega blurred in his mind. He remembered a man sitting on a snowy mountainside, his skin knitted together with synth-flesh. He could not reconcile the two images, the two men. It all seemed unreal.

"I've asked about you," Omega said. "I know you. I know you because I grew up like you. I wasn't a slave, but I might well have been. My mother worked at things she should not have, harder than she should have, longer than she should have—just for me."

*My mother did the same.*

"My mother worked herself to death for me," Omega said.

*I can only hope that Shmi is well and safe.*

"What is the Force for, if not to protect what you have? Why should you give that up because you are a Jedi? The Force can bring you all the power you need. Yet the Jedi tell you that you must have nothing. Why is that?"

"Ours is a path of service," Anakin said.

"And who do you serve? The Senate?" Omega laughed softly. "A group of fools who can be bought?"

"We serve justice."

"Whose?"

"Justice does not have a master."

## Jude Watson

“Shouldn’t it?” Omega leaned back again, resting against the pillows. “I am just a seeker, as you are. You have been told that the Sith belong to the dark side. Yet the Jedi know little of the Sith. What you don’t know could fill galaxies. Well, you do know one thing—that there is one Sith still alive. I know this, too. I wanted to be rich enough to find that Sith. Then one day I realized that was wrong. The only way I would find a Sith is if I was rich enough, powerful enough, so that he wanted to find *me*. I am not rich enough yet. But I will be.”

Omega paused. “I’m not Force-sensitive. I can never be a Sith. I have found something at last that I cannot buy. But I can be close to that power. I can sit at his side, as I am sitting by your side.”

“That’s why you attack the Jedi,” Anakin said. “You want to impress him.”

“Yes, you see? It’s nothing personal.” Omega leaned closer to him. “Don’t you think I could have killed you if I wanted?”

“No,” Anakin said. “I know you *think* you could have.”

“I like you,” Omega said. “I liked what I saw on Haariden. Your Master you can keep. Typical Jedi.” He waved a hand. “But you...you I like.”

“I’m honored,” Anakin said.

“Sarcasm from a Jedi? I knew I liked you.” Omega leaned back against the cushions and crossed an ankle over his leg comfortably. “You’re different because you didn’t grow up in that Temple. You know how power works because you were ground down beneath it. You know how the powerless have only their dignity to comfort them, and how, some days, that is not enough. Not nearly enough.”

*Shmi*. He had left her with nothing but her dignity.

Mellora stood restlessly. “Let me show him.”

“No.”

“Yes.” Mellora reached into her pocket and withdrew Darra’s lightsaber. “I’ve been learning how to use it. One day I will fight a Jedi.”

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

The Force he had kept at bay shot through him, revitalizing his muscles. The sight of Darra's lightsaber in Mellora's hand had done it. He felt strength move through him. He knew he could rise now.

Even Omega looked amazed when he shot to his feet. He activated his lightsaber in a motion so fast they could not follow it with their eyes.

"How about today?" he taunted, taking a step toward her. "Are you ready to fight a Jedi today?" His voice was thick and it was an effort to get the words out. He could feel his leg muscles trembling but he knew they couldn't see it.

"Well, well," Omega breathed. "Impressive."

But the others were not so calm. They drew blasters.

"Shoot him!" Mellora shrieked. She activated the lightsaber clumsily.

Anakin took a step. He felt unsteady but in control. Mellora began to wave the lightsaber. She tried to execute an offensive thrust, but the lightsaber swung crazily. She was not able to balance it.

"Mellora, don't be foolish," Omega warned.

But Mellora did not drop the lightsaber, and Anakin was more afraid that she would injure herself than he was of the blasters. He knew his usual control would be off, so he would have to compensate. He could not risk a complicated move. Simple was best.

Keeping the lightsaber in one hand, he struck out with a strong kick in order to dislodge Darra's lightsaber from her hand. But Mellora surprised him by twirling away. She was still hampered by the lightsaber, but the combination of Anakin's slowed reaction time and her own skill caused him to miss. Anakin stumbled, and to his surprise he could not recover easily.

He went down on one hand. Mellora smiled. She raised the lightsaber. Even she could probably manage a downward stroke.

## **Jude Watson**

He called on the Force. It surged through him. He balanced on one hand and swept his feet in an arc that hit Mellora on the ankles and took her down. Darra's lightsaber went flying.

The others scattered, afraid of the lightsaber, and wildly fired their blasters. Granta Omega looked up, his mouth open, his hands outstretched for the lightsaber.

Desperately, Anakin threw himself at Granta Omega. He hit him broadside, and they both fell. The lightsaber clattered to the floor, deactivated.

The group saw Anakin on the floor with their leader and pointed their blasters at him. He raised his own lightsaber to deflect the fire, but he could see that he would not be able to hold out for long.

Then suddenly a blue blur appeared through the door. Metal peeled back and Obi-Wan leaped through the opening.

## Chapter Fourteen

For a moment, no one moved. Anakin felt as though he had used up his last reserve of strength. He was sprawled on the floor, looking up at his Master. Mellora lay frozen, her eyes moving from the lightsaber on the floor to the activated one in Obi-Wan's hand.

Granta Omega laughed at the same moment that the blasters fired.

Obi-Wan stepped forward, his lightsaber constantly moving, deflecting the fire. Blaster bolts pinged off the walls. Obi-Wan came and stood over Anakin, who began to try to rise.

Granta Omega's fingers closed over the fallen lightsaber's hilt. With the other hand, he reached down and activated a switch on a device hanging on his belt. A door in a console opened and released five seekers into the air. They honed in on Obi-Wan and peppered him with blaster fire. Obi-Wan swung his lightsaber, deflecting the fire, and leaped in the air to slash the seekers one by one. He had his hands full. Anakin watched as Granta Omega, Mellora, and the rest of the group escaped through a window. Omega held Darra's lightsaber.

Anakin saw it happening and felt responsible again. If his Master hadn't needed to protect him, he would have captured them all. A last surge of strength helped him down one seeker

## Jude Watson

with an awkward swing from the floor. Obi-Wan took out the last two.

He reached down and helped Anakin to his feet. “What happened?”

“They drugged me. The mug...”

Obi-Wan picked up the mug and shoved it in his tunic. “We’ll analyze it at the Temple.”

“They had a Sith artifact. A Holocron pyramid. T’ic is Granta Omega—”

“I know.” Obi-Wan searched the room. “They must have taken it with them.” He crouched in front of the console. He reached in and rummaged through a travel kit. He threw aside several basic items, then held up a portable scanner. He studied it for a moment. “Now this is interesting.”

Anakin nodded. He felt as though it took him several long minutes to complete the nod. Obi-Wan noted this and jumped to his feet.

“We’d better get you back to the Temple.”

Obi-Wan stood in front of the assembled Jedi Council. In one hand he held the portable scanner. He stood respectfully as the Jedi Council sat, absorbing what he had told them.

“Certain you are of this,” Yoda said.

“Completely.”

“Ambitious, this Granta Omega is.”

“That is the danger. He infiltrated the Senate expedition because he knew it was going to examine the mineral rights of Haariden. It was the Senate’s secret plan to defuse the civil war. I read the expedition’s report. It was incomplete, but it shows one thing clearly—there is an active volcano on Haariden. The mountain Kaachtari will soon have a massive eruption, an eruption so powerful it will change the coastline nearby. The titanite that has been hidden in the planet’s core will spew out with the lava. A giant tidal wave will form and cover the

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

landmass. Sano Sauro has buried the report, but it is in the Senate archives.” Obi-Wan held up the portable scanner. “This is an underwater scanner. He is planning to mine the titanite from the sea. He will be able to do so if we don’t stop him. I believe he wants to control the bacta market for the entire galaxy.”

“What do you wish to do, Master Kenobi?” Ki-Adi-Mundi asked. “He has not committed a crime.”

“Not for the bacta, no, not yet,” Obi-Wan said. “Although he did use an alias to get on a Senate expedition, and that would lead to censure, at least. He has committed serious crimes against the Jedi, however. He has paid bounty hunters and soldiers to attack us on two occasions. He drugged my Padawan.”

“This is something you know, but you must also prove,” Ki-Adi-Mundi said. His second heart pulsed in his high skull. “That is the difficulty.”

“I can bring him back to Coruscant for questioning by the Senate,” Obi-Wan said. “At least we can prevent what he plans. He wants to gain even greater power and wealth in order to attract the hidden Sith Lord. He admitted this to Anakin.”

“Perhaps he would attract him,” Mace Windu said. “If we let him, if we stood back and watched, we would be able to track the Sith Lord ourselves. He would be flushed out of hiding before he is ready.”

“Are you saying we should not stop Omega?” Obi-Wan asked in disbelief.

Mace Windu looked at him sharply. “We are not drawing conclusions. We are speculating.”

“All sides of the issue we must examine,” Yoda said.

Mace Windu swiveled in his chair to look out over the twinkling lights of Coruscant. “Darkness lies ahead. We can all feel it. Is this a place where we can turn? Where we can flush out our enemy and expose him?”

“But if we don’t go after Omega, he will control the market on bacta,” Obi-Wan said. “He could do anything. Raise the price

## Jude Watson

too high. Create shortages. I have no doubt he would do these things. Millions would suffer.”

“More millions suffer in our visions of the future,” Mace said. He was still looking out at the lights. He seemed to be speaking to himself. “We see much pain.”

“Visions can only show us what *may* be,” Obi-Wan said. “Granta Omega can do great harm now.”

A buzz of conversation began among the Council Members. Mace Windu consulted with Yoda. Adi Gallia leaned over to speak with Even Piell. It was highly unusual for the Council to break into private consultations. The gravity of the issue caused it. There were too many important questions connected with it.

“Go, Obi-Wan must.” Yaddle’s soft voice stopped the Council Members. Everyone turned to her with great courtesy. Yaddle rarely spoke, but when she did, she always seemed to sum up the conclusions they would have reached eventually.

She blinked her light gray-blue eyes, which were so like Yoda’s. “Suffering we cannot allow in order to prevent what we fear. Stop it we must when we can.”

Yoda leaned forward on his gimer stick. “Correct, Yaddle is. Has your Padawan recovered, Obi-Wan?”

Obi-Wan nodded. “I have arranged transport. I can be on Haariden by sunrise.”

“Dangerous it is,” Yoda said. “Soon, the eruption will occur. Take chances you must not.”

“May the Force be with you,” Mace Windu said, concluding the meeting. He still looked troubled.

Obi-Wan bowed. He left the Council chamber and hurried directly to the med clinic. Every moment counted.

Anakin was sitting up on the med couch, swinging his legs. He was pale, but he looked up at Obi-Wan expectantly.

“I hear you are cleared for duty,” Obi-Wan said. “Are you sure you are fully recovered?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes. Where are we going?”



## **STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise**

“Back to Haariden,” Obi-Wan said. “We’re going to watch a volcano erupt.”

## Chapter Fifteen

As the Galan starfighter shot through hyperspace, Anakin had some time to rest and think.

The rest he needed. He did not want to tell Obi-Wan that even though the drug had worn off, his senses still felt blurred, as if there were a veil between him and everything else. But he knew the veil would lift. He could feel clarity returning with every passing minute.

What he did not know was how to sort out his feelings about Granta Omega. He was not naïve enough to think that evil announced itself by knocking on one's door with an iron fist. But he had not expected evil to come cloaked in quite so much charm.

He had enjoyed the earlier time he'd spent with Granta Omega. When he'd known him as Tic Verdun, he had laughed at the things he said and felt warmed by his friendship. They had not known each other long, but Anakin had to admit it: He'd felt kinship with Tic. On Haariden, he had offered him friendship. He had made him feel a little less alone.

How could he reconcile his feelings with the knowledge that Omega's one desire was to worship at the heart of evil? An evil that had murdered the one being who had saved Anakin from a life of slavery: Qui-Gon Jinn.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

Obi-Wan had been in the small ship's library, checking the geological reports on Haariden. He came to sit by Anakin. "Not too much longer. Is there something you want to discuss with me, Padawan?"

He wasn't ready to talk about it. "No," Anakin said.

Obi-Wan hesitated. "Before I arrived, did you talk much to the others?"

Anakin nodded. "They fed me false information about Granta Omega. They were making things up to tease me even as he sat right in front of me. I see that now. I feel foolish."

"It is not something to feel foolish about. Those who set out to deceive are the true fools." Obi-Wan paused. "And Omega himself? What did you think of him?"

The gentleness in his Master's tone undid Anakin's reserve. "I *liked* him," he burst out. "How could I like such a being?"

"I would guess that is because he is likable," Obi-Wan said dryly.

His Master's calmness made Anakin feel better. "Shouldn't the Force have alerted me to the dark side in him?"

"Not necessarily," Obi-Wan said. "The Force is not a truth-detector. We can rely on it, but we can't expect it to save us. We must save ourselves. We must use our own intuition, our own intelligence. Your feelings about Granta Omega don't have anything to do with the Force. They have everything to do with experience."

"Meaning I don't have enough?"

"Maybe," Obi-Wan said. "Perhaps I wouldn't have picked up on Omega's true character, either. But I have seen enough to know that evil can wear a charming face, my young Padawan. Charisma is not a virtue. It's a trait. It is not good or bad. Evil people can possess it. They often do and it is what makes them dangerous."

"He says he is a seeker, just as the Jedi are," Anakin said. "He says the Jedi fear the Sith, but they know nothing of them."

## Jude Watson

"He is wrong," Obi-Wan said. "The Jedi have deep knowledge of the Sith. Have you forgotten that one of them killed Qui-Gon?"

"That knowledge is with me every day," Anakin said quietly. "But it is also part of the problem. When I think of evil, I see that Sith Lord's face. I do not see Granta Omega's."

"Evil has many faces," Obi-Wan responded. "It can masquerade as vision. One must look beneath the words, beneath the mask."

An indicator light flashed. Obi-Wan sprang to his feet. "We've arrived."

Obi-Wan slid into the pilot's seat. Anakin sat next to him. The starfighter shuddered slightly as they came out of hyperspace. The planet of Haariden lay ahead.

Obi-Wan entered the coordinates for landing. He shot Anakin a quick questioning look. "Are you ready to face him again?"

He was not sure, but he knew he had to be. "I am ready, Master."

He felt the dark side of the Force gather as they entered the planet's atmosphere. As they drew closer they could see the large areas of land that had been laid to waste by war.

"I am not happy to see this place again," Obi-Wan murmured.

The craft skimmed over the foothills. Obi-Wan landed in a valley near an outcropping of trees.

"We need to keep clear of the eruption site," he said. "We'll track Omega on swoop bikes. According to Jocasta Nu, we have about an hour before the volcano begins to erupt."

"Not much time," Anakin said as they hurried toward the stowed swoops.

"It will have to be enough."

Anakin swung his leg over the swoop. He was feeling better, but heaviness still seemed to hang on him, clouding his mind. The med staff had assured him that the drug was completely out of his system. He was not sure why he wasn't feeling himself yet.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

He suspected it had something to do with the dark feeling of doom he received from this planet.

They took off on their swoops, gliding over the hills and heading for the rugged mountains ahead. One mountain pushed high above the rest, seeming to thrust itself out of the planet's core. It was topped with snow, its peak hidden in the clouds.

"That's it," Obi-Wan said. "That's Kaachtari."

They pushed the swoops to maximum speed. The air turned colder as they rose to higher elevations. Suddenly, Anakin saw a column of steam spurt from the ground below. He swerved the swoop just in time to avoid being scalded.

"We're in the danger zone now," Obi-Wan said. "Be careful."

As they rode on, Anakin saw that deep fissures had cracked the earth and split gigantic boulders in two. The steam rose hundreds of meters high in some places. He heard a muffled sound, like a faraway starfighter engine roaring.

"Groundquakes," Obi-Wan said. "Small ones, so far."

Anakin looked ahead. He saw a line of soldiers hiking down the mountain. He pointed them out to Obi-Wan.

His Master frowned. "This area was supposed to have been evacuated. Let's get a little closer."

They descended. Hearing the noise, the soldiers looked up. Some of them raised blasters.

"Master?"

"Don't worry." Obi-Wan suddenly zoomed down, landing directly in front of them. Anakin followed his Master to the head of the line to stand before a gaunt soldier with a grimy face and a beard gray with ash.

"I see we meet again, Captain Welflet," Obi-Wan said.

The captain nodded a greeting. "I thought you evacuated." A groundquake shook the area, and the captain staggered. "You should have."

"We did. We came back. We're looking for Granta Omega," Obi-Wan said. "Have you seen him?"

"No," the captain said. "I have enough worries."

## Jude Watson

He stared at Obi-Wan when he said this, but Anakin knew he was lying.

"This area was evacuated," Obi-Wan said. "The volcano is about to erupt."

"I know," Captain Welflet said. "But we had word of enemy patrols in the area. They are using the eruption to gain land."

"But you will all die," Obi-Wan said. "The eruption will cover all this." He swung an arm out. "The scientists know this. The sensors indicate it."

Captain Welflet snorted. "Scientists and sensors. This is our land. We are not going to lose it."

"I see you have some new weaponry since I saw you last," Obi-Wan remarked.

The captain shifted his gaze. "Is the Jedi so interested in our weaponry?"

The mountain rumbled. A steam column suddenly split the rocky ground and spewed into the air.

"We don't have much time," Obi-Wan said. "Let me tell you what I think, and what you don't know. I think you accepted payment in weapons for land that will be useless to you. But you were tricked."

"That is an interesting supposition," the captain said cautiously.

"Granta Omega paid you for the rights to the new sea," Obi-Wan said. "What you don't know is that he wants it for a reason. The volcano will deposit titanite on the land before the wave brings the water. He will mine it and make a fortune. And you will lose out."

"He said he wanted it for a fish farm," the captain muttered. "And we believed him! He had us meet him here to do the deal." He looked down at the plains below. "It belongs to him now."

"Tell me where he is, and I might be able to help you," Obi-Wan said.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

“He does not deserve our loyalty,” the captain said. “He is above, on the ridge, conducting experiments. Here are the coordinates.” The captain gave them to Obi-Wan.

“You must get down the mountain as quickly as you can,” Obi-Wan said.

“We have air transport below. But we are on the lookout for the enemy.”

“Forget the enemy,” Obi-Wan said. “If you don’t, you will die.”

“Then we will die,” Captain Welflet said. “But we will die on our land.”

Obi-Wan swung his leg back over the swoop and motioned to Anakin. He plugged the coordinates into the onboard computer.

“We must hurry, Padawan,” he said. “I don’t like the look of this scanner. The groundquakes are intensifying.”

“But the captain and his men,” Anakin said. “How can we leave them?”

Obi-Wan shook his head sadly. “I cannot change his mind, Padawan. They must do what they will do, and we must do the same.”

They took off to the spot where the captain had left Granta Omega. Flying was difficult now, as the steam hissed suddenly into the air, sometimes followed by showers of large rocks. Anakin felt dread rising within him. He did not want to see Granta Omega again. Yet he had to.

They saw him high on a snowy ridge. He was with Mellora. They were both dressed in white thermal gear to protect them from the cold. They were packing up their equipment and heading for their swoops. They clearly did not trust anyone else to pinpoint the titanite before the eruption.

Obi-Wan leaned over his swoop, urging the machine to go faster. Granta Omega looked up and saw them. Even from that distance, Anakin could tell he was dismayed. He spoke a quick word to Mellora and they took off.

## Jude Watson

"We'll follow them to the ship," Obi-Wan said. "We can commandeer it and return them to Coruscant."

"It can't be that easy," Anakin said.

"It won't be," Obi-Wan said.

Granta and Mellora did not attempt to lose the Jedi. No doubt they knew they could not. The Jedi gained on them, but Mellora and Omega managed to reach their SoroSuub at the foot of the volcano. Omega activated the landing ramp and they flew inside.

"We can make it!" Obi-Wan shouted as the landing ramp began to close.

Anakin zoomed alongside his Master. They angled their swoops as the ramp slid closed. They slid inside, feeling the whoosh of air as the ramp slid into place.

The cockpit of the ship was empty.

Obi-Wan leaped off the swoop and activated his lightsaber in one motion. He ran through the SoroSuub. It took only a few seconds to discover what had happened.

"They flew out the cargo door as we came in through the landing ramp," Obi-Wan said, disgusted. "He planned it."

He ran to the cockpit controls. He stabbed at the activation key for the landing ramp, then the cargo doors.

"He's locked them." He tried the engines. Nothing happened. "The ship is in complete lockdown."

Obi-Wan's face was dark with anger. Anakin watched, fascinated, as his Master absorbed his anger and then released it.

"So here we are," Obi-Wan said in a measured tone. "Locked in." He crossed to the cockpit windscreen. Granta Omega and Mellora were nowhere in sight. But the mountain was. It filled their vision as it belched rocks and steam.

As they watched, the ship suddenly shook with the tremor of a huge earthquake. The scene in front of them vibrated. Anakin couldn't believe what he was seeing. The peak was now disintegrating. Huge chunks of the mountain were falling away.



## **STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise**

The entire side of the volcano was collapsing in a tremendous landside.

And they were in its path.

## Chapter Sixteen

Obi-Wan tried the engines again. “I don’t know how to override this.”

“Let me try.” There was nothing Anakin couldn’t do with engines. He slid open the panel to the engine and slithered inside. “This will take me about twenty minutes.”

“We don’t have twenty,” Obi-Wan said. He had already calculated the speed of the landslide. “We have maybe five before the lava pours out. If we’re lucky. We’ll have to cut our way out.”

Anakin scrambled out and followed Obi-Wan to the opening to the ramp. Obi-Wan began to try to cut the durasteel away.

“Something’s wrong,” he muttered as Anakin joined him. “The ship’s hull should be thin here. We should be able to cut through in minutes.”

“It’s going to take us longer than that,” Anakin said.

The minutes ticked by as they worked at the metal. Obi-Wan looked out the windscreen to check the progress of the eruption. The noise was now like the roar of a fleet of engines. “We’re not going to make it.”

They looked at each other. They hadn’t given up hope. There was a way out. There always was.

They just didn’t have much time to figure it out.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

Lava was now spewing out of the top of the mountain. Whole kilometers of dirt and rocks mixed with hot lava would soon be barreling down the steep slope.

Obi-Wan pushed his lightsaber through the door. He began to move it downward, straining with the effort. Anakin joined him, the sweat rolling down his face.

Suddenly and violently, molten lava poured out of the volcano at frightening speed. The avalanche of rock and lava smashed against the ship. The jolt threw them across the cockpit and slammed them against the opposite wall. The craft tilted onto one side, sending them crashing onto the floor. The ship jolted downhill at incredible speed, carried by the force of the landslide.

Anakin hung on to the wall. Looking straight up, he could see through the cockpit windscreen. All he saw was rocks and lava obscuring his view of the sky. He knew where they were being carried. The rock slide would drop them into the sea. They would sink. Or else they would be caught in the giant tidal wave that was forming even now.

His head slammed against the side of the ship. He held on as his teeth rattled. Death was near. Anakin could feel it. Now he understood why he had felt so uneasy on this planet. Here death had waited for him.

Obi-Wan suddenly pounded against the ship's wall with his lightsaber hilt as they bounced down the mountain, swept along by the lava flow. Anakin had never seen his Master give way to his anger before.

"That's it," Obi-Wan shouted over the awful roaring noise. "It's a ship within a ship. That's why the walls are so thick. Anakin, help me find it."

"Find what?" he shouted.

"The cockpit. The real cockpit!" Obi-Wan scrambled along the wall, knocking on it with the hilt of his lightsaber. "Listen for something hollow."

## Jude Watson

The lurching of the ship made it hard to maneuver, but Anakin followed his Master. He knocked against the wall with his lightsaber hilt.

"Here!" Obi-Wan shouted suddenly. He activated his lightsaber and began to cut through the wall.

Anakin grabbed handholds and fought his way toward his Master. He worked alongside him. Obi-Wan was right. The metal was thinner here. It peeled back in strips. They were being pounded by the landslide and it was hard to cut, but they struggled to finish.

At last there was an opening large enough to crawl inside. To Anakin's surprise, he found a complete cockpit with engine controls.

"Can you fly it?" Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin nodded. He strapped himself into the seat. The ship was on its side. He pushed the left engine and the ship rose straight up.

He kept pushing the engine and the ship revolved. Then he accelerated, and they shot through the lava and the pummeling rocks into the clear air above.

Obi-Wan sank back into the seat next to him. "That was close," he panted.

"I wouldn't want it any closer," Anakin admitted. "Where to, Master?"

"They'll be watching from a safe distance," Obi-Wan said. "Along the coast, but out of range of the wave." He bent over the scanner, comparing its readings to the map on the shipboard computer. "Let's try these coordinates." He pointed them out to Anakin.

He nodded and piloted the ship back toward the eruption. He would skirt the worst of it, but they would have a bumpy flight. Rocks hammered down on the shell of the ship, and the air pockets were deep. The ship kept slamming into them.

"Master, look!" Anakin pointed ahead. The Haariden captain and the soldiers were trapped on the plain as the landslide

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

headed toward them. They had turned to face it. There was nowhere to run.

“See if we can make it!” Obi-Wan ordered. “Push the engines!”

Anakin accelerated till the engines screamed, piloting the ship straight into the spew of lava and rocks. The ship shook as a boulder struck it. Then another.

Captain Welflet saw them approaching and lifted a hand. Anakin did not know if it was in thanks or farewell. In the next instant the landslide had swept him and his soldiers to their deaths. They were buried under the land they had fought over so desperately.

Shaken, Anakin pushed the engines to rise above the eruption again. He felt a sickness in his stomach.

His Master said nothing, but closed his eyes for a moment.

“I wish I hadn’t seen that,” Anakin said.

Obi-Wan opened his eyes. “Such is the life of a Jedi.”

The cockpit indicators began to swing wildly. The ship lurched to one side.

“I think the power cells were hit,” Anakin said. “We’ve got to land. The power is draining fast.”

“We’re almost out of range of the eruption,” Obi-Wan said, his eyes on the monitor. “Keep going...”

Anakin held onto the controls as the ship lurched again. He heard the whine of the power cells as they powered down. “Master, I’m losing the ship.”

“All right. Land it where you can.”

Anakin found a smooth area of sand. They were near the coast of the sea here. He set the ship down bumpily. He had just enough energy to land.

The ship settled into the sand and the engines cut out.

“Good thing we still have the swoops,” Obi-Wan said.

They climbed out of the concealed cockpit. The swoop bikes were smashed from the rough journey, but still functioned. Anakin activated the landing ramp from the interior cockpit. It

## Jude Watson

squealed as the metal rubbed against metal, but it opened far enough for them to slide out with the swoops.

The air was thick with ash. A strange smell was in the air. It was like burning, but it wasn't born of flame or smoke.

"It is the core," Obi-Wan said. "Metals and molten rock."

They piloted the swoops away from the ship and began to search for Omega and Mellora. At last they came upon them on a plateau that overlooked the sea. There they would be protected from the tidal wave.

Granta Omega saw them coming. There was no way to surprise them. Anakin saw him bend down. He settled something against his shoulder. A missile launcher.

"Master—"

"I see it. Dive, Padawan."

They dived as the first missile headed their way. Its target was Obi-Wan. His Master leaned to one side and the missile missed him by a meter.

Another missile was launched. Anakin dived, but the missile was targeted at Obi-Wan again. His Master practiced evasive action, and this time, the missile missed him by mere centimeters.

Another missile was launched. This one, too, was headed for Obi-Wan.

"He's only aiming at me," Obi-Wan called. "Get closer, Anakin!"

Anakin zoomed past the missile. He saw Omega smile and target a slowing Obi-Wan again, but Mellora had vanished. He pushed the swoop engines past maximum.

He jumped the last few meters just as Omega launched another missile. Anakin glanced back in time to see his Master barely evade it. His swoop seemed damaged by the action.

Omega had anticipated Anakin. He held the missile launcher against his shoulder, his finger hovering over the activation button. "Your Master's swoop is overheating. He doesn't have good maneuverability anymore. This one might get him. I've always thought that to be personally responsible for the death of

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

a Jedi would truly help me make my mark. Would you really miss him so much, Anakin?" He grinned at Anakin, the ash-filled wind whipping his dark hair across his face.

"Don't," Anakin said. "You will regret it."

"I knew you'd get out of that ship!" Omega cried. "You will make a great Jedi Knight one day, Anakin Skywalker. But you will be even greater if you listen to me!"

Anakin took a step toward him. "My Master and I request that you return to Coruscant with us for questioning by the authorities."

Omega sighed. "What a kind invitation. I'm afraid I'll have to refuse. I'm busy, you see." He inched backward toward his swoop, his finger still hovering over the launch button.

Anakin leaped feet first. But instead of going for Omega, he kicked the swoop. Omega's eyes widened in shock as the swoop was knocked over the edge of the plateau. At the same time, Anakin's arm flew out and came down on the missile launcher, dislodging it from Omega's shoulder. With dismay, Anakin saw that the readied missile was launched as the launcher hit the ground.

Omega fumbled inside his tunic. Anakin heard the whine of a swoop engine behind him. He whirled in time to sidestep Mellora, who headed toward them at top speed. Omega tossed a thermal detonator as he clumsily leaped aboard Mellora's swoop.

Anakin caught the detonator and tossed it as far as he could. The explosion sent shock waves through the air. He raced back to his own swoop and leaped aboard.

Omega released seeker droids into the air. There were at least ten, heading toward Obi-Wan like a flock of deadly attack birds. Obi-Wan now had to contend with the droids and the tracking missile.

Anakin swung at the droids with his lightsaber as his swoop lurched crazily. He was trying to corner Omega and Mellora against the sheer face of the ridge, but the two zoomed below him, heading for the sandy plain.

## Jude Watson

It was a tactical error. Now they were heading toward the sea.

Obi-Wan turned his swoop at the last possible moment and the missile impacted on a seeker droid. He joined Anakin. They zoomed after Mellora and Omega.

The seekers were as thick in the air as the ash. Obi-Wan and Anakin swung their lightsabers constantly, sending them smashing down to the ground below.

Obi-Wan's speeder engine was smoking badly. "I'm overheating," he called to Anakin. "Some shrapnel pierced the engine."

Anakin maneuvered his swoop close to his Master. "Hop aboard."

Obi-Wan balanced on the seat and leaped onto Anakin's swoop. The swoop rocked from side to side, but Anakin straightened it and kept on flying. Obi-Wan stood on the seat behind him, balancing easily. His lightsaber was a blur as he swung it at the attack droids.

"Master, the water!" Anakin called.

Far out on the sea, they could see a wave. It was as tall as a Coruscant skyscraper. It was a wall of water moving at more than a hundred kilometers an hour.

Omega and Mellora had gone too far in order to escape. Now they were trapped between the oncoming wave and the Jedi. They hovered in the air, staring at the wave. Omega looked back at the approaching Jedi defiantly. Mellora only looked afraid.

Anakin pulled up the swoop close to Omega. They could hear the eerie sound of the wave now, a sound like no other Anakin had ever heard.

"You must come with us now," Obi-Wan said, his lightsaber raised.

"Granta, it's over," Mellora said, her eyes on the approaching wave. "We must—"

In answer, Omega wrenched the controls from Mellora. He shot the swoop straight toward the wall of water. They could see



## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

Mellora's mouth forming a scream before its sound was snatched away by the roar of the titanic wave.

Grimly, Anakin headed after them. He stayed below Omega's swoop, hoping to force them upward. He didn't know if they would be able to clear the wave in time.

Omega swerved up, trying to clear the wave. Mellora had Darra's lightsaber and was trying to activate it. Anakin didn't know why. There was little she could do with it. Perhaps she wanted to force Omega to surrender.

Omega suddenly reached out and casually put his foot against Mellora. With a push, he shoved her off the swoop.

She fell toward the wave, shrieking.

Anakin gunned the motor and dove under her. Obi-Wan caught her in his arms. The lightsaber fell from her fingers, and Anakin lurched to the side in order to snatch it from the air. Then he zoomed above as the water curled over their heads.

They couldn't make it. He took a deep breath as they went straight into the top of the wave. He felt the power of the water drive them backward. The controls shook in his hand. He heard the engine whine. He could only see water, and he was confused now. Were they heading up or down?

Then the Force entered him, and he did not see the water as a wall. He saw it for what it was. Full of particles, full of gaps, honeycombed with light. He headed for the gaps, willing the swoop engine to obey him.

They broke through the water into the air. Mellora clung to Obi-Wan, gasping.

Omega was a speck in the distance, heading away from them.

"He would have killed me!" Mellora choked.

Anakin hovered in the air, watching the speck disappear. They had lost him again.

"Head for our ship, Padawan," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin turned back toward safety. He did not believe that Omega wanted to kill Mellora. He had pushed her off knowing that the Jedi would save her. He just wanted to get away.

## **Jude Watson**

But it was better that Mellora not know that.

“I know where he is going,” she told the Jedi. “I know where he goes when he loses. I can take you there.”

“You don’t have to,” Obi-Wan said. “I know where he is going, too.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Because of the eruption, hostilities had ceased temporarily on Haariden. They left Mellora with the authorities there with instructions to hold her until the Senate could send a ship for her. But they could not be certain how long she would be held. It was clear that she was prepared to lie her way out of trouble.

“She hates him now,” Obi-Wan said as they hurried to their ship. “I only hope she sees what he really is. He would sacrifice her young life to save his own.”

“But he knew we would catch her,” Anakin said.

Obi-Wan shot his Padawan a curious look. “Are you certain of that?”

Anakin said nothing. Disquiet settled inside Obi-Wan as they both jumped into their craft. He plugged in the coordinates for Nierport Seven. They were so close behind Granta Omega. They just might catch him.

“How do you know where he is going, Master?” Anakin asked as they shot into hyperspace.

“It was the ship within a ship that told me,” Obi-Wan explained. “I remembered his boyhood home. The walls were thicker than the other houses, but not too thick that they didn’t blend in. But when I thought about it, I realized that the

## Jude Watson

proportions were slightly off. I think there is a hidden room there. A room in the walls themselves.”

Dusk was settling on Nierport Seven when they arrived. They landed on the outskirts of the settlement and hurried to the house.

There were no lights inside. Obi-Wan took out his lightsaber and cut a hole in the door.

The house was empty. Even the bedroll and stove were gone.

“We are too late,” Anakin said.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said. “He must have assumed that Mellora would tell us what she knew.”

He felt along the walls, knocking them with his lightsaber hilt. When he found what he was looking for, he cut through the walls with his lightsaber. Here the stone was only centimeters thick, bound to durasteel walls.

Beyond the wall was a room filled with datascreens. Obi-Wan and Anakin climbed through the hole.

Obi-Wan began to access the files. One after another he called up the holofiles. They were coded, but he was confident that the Jedi could crack them. He would take them back to the Temple.

“These must be his companies,” he said. “His aliases are here, text docs, his other homes, bases of operations...it’s all here. We’ve got him. All his secrets are now ours.”

“It looks like he has an entire fleet of starships on some planet in the Outer Rim,” Anakin said. “The planet’s name is coded.”

As he read the file, the letters began to fade. “Master—”

“The files are disappearing,” Obi-Wan said. He quickly hit the keys, tapping furiously. “I can’t stop it.”

They watched as the information disappeared into fragments of light. The light dissolved into particles.

“He instituted a wipe from wherever he is,” Obi-Wan said. “Now it is as though he never existed. He truly is a void.”

They stared at the empty air. It was as if Granta Omega were mocking them from wherever he was.

## STAR WARS: The Master of Disguise

“Now he has no past,” Anakin said.

“And he’s just become more dangerous than ever,” Obi-Wan said. “He has nothing to lose.”

Obi-Wan watched the emotion flit over his Padawan’s face. Confusion was there, and wonderment. Granta Omega had touched something in Anakin that Obi-Wan could only guess at. Perhaps it was their similar origins, the desolation of the places they’d known as children. Perhaps it was the way they had left their pasts behind. Perhaps it was simply that for the first time, Anakin had seen evil coupled with charisma, and was struggling to understand it.

He wasn’t sure what it was. But it worried him.

Yes, the Jedi had a dangerous enemy. It wasn’t Omega’s cleverness that concerned Obi-Wan. It wasn’t his desire to impress a Sith Lord he had never met. It was the strange pull he had for his Padawan. Granta Omega might turn out to be the most dangerous enemy they would ever have to face.









**Book Five**  
**The School of Fear**



STAR  
WARS®

# JEDI QUEST

BY JUDE WATSON

THE SCHOOL OF FEAR





# Chapter One

Patience was required of every Jedi. No matter what the pressure, a Jedi maintained inner calm. Every Padawan Learner knew the story of Jedi Master Yaddle, who had been imprisoned underground on Koba for several centuries and never lost her serenity.

*Then again, Anakin Skywalker thought, even Master Yaddle might have cracked if she had to deal with Senatorial procedure.*

Anakin hid his smile. Without seeming to move, he tensed and relaxed his muscles. He had been sitting for hours in the Polestar Reception Room off the Grand Hall of the vast Senate complex. The huge room had a soaring vaulted ceiling, which was gilded with sheets of precious metals from various worlds. The seating was low to the ground, wide with adjustable armrests for many-limbed beings. Plush cushions and reclining backs had tempted several beings into slumber. So did the large screens showing a droning speech in the main Senate chamber.

Anakin's Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, sat quietly, every muscle still. His eyes rested on the gilded wall in front of him. To anyone walking by, he appeared completely composed. But Anakin knew his Master well, and he could sense an impatience that radiated like heat off Obi-Wan's stillness.

## Jude Watson

They had been sitting for most of the morning. Anakin could feel every minute of that wait in his coiled muscles. They had been summoned early that morning with the news that a decision on Obi-Wan's petition for an "order to reveal" had been reached. Obi-Wan had filed the petition against an influential Senator, Sano Sauro. When they'd arrived that morning, Obi-Wan had been directed by a Senatorial aide to wait "for just five minutes, please." That was three hours ago. They were still waiting.

Anakin's boot began to tap a quick rhythm on the stone floor. With one glance from Obi-Wan, Anakin stopped.

"Can I get you anything, Master? Tea?" Anakin asked. He would love to have something—*anything*—to do.

"No, thank you, Padawan. We will wait." Obi-Wan crossed his arms and resumed his intense scrutiny of the wall.

Nothing but the pursuit of Granta Omega would have brought them here. The galactic criminal had set his sights on the Jedi, and Obi-Wan had twice been his target. Omega was not practiced in the dark side of the Force, but he was fascinated with the Sith and knew that one was at large in the galaxy. He had set out to lure that Sith, and was willing to kill a Jedi in order to do so. He would amass even more wealth using any means he could. Obi-Wan considered him a great enemy of the Jedi.

Anakin had wanted to hunt him down, to start somewhere in the far-flung reaches of the galaxy and gather information, but Obi-Wan had counseled patience. They could wander the galaxy for months or years without getting any closer to Omega. Instead, Obi-Wan told Anakin, they must follow the only lead they had: Years before, Senator Sano Sauro had taken Omega on as his protégé, and was probably still in touch with him.

Sauro was also an enemy of the Jedi, though he cloaked it behind a silky manner and Senatorial procedure. Obi-Wan would have to force him to cooperate. In order to have access to the information Obi-Wan was sure was buried in his files, they would have to follow Senate procedure. And Senate procedure was the one thing that Anakin knew his Master had no patience for. As a

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

matter of fact, it was the one thing he knew that Obi-Wan was incredibly bad at.

So Obi-Wan had turned to an expert: a young Senate aide with a brilliant mind, the Svivreni Tyro Caladian. Tyro had made it his business to have at his fingertips the most unnecessarily complicated, ridiculously obscure, and surprisingly silly rules of order.

Tyro had explained that their only course of action would be to file an order to reveal. This order could be obtained only through a complicated series of steps that included petitions, signatures, approvals, and seals. Obi-Wan had made it through these steps, and at last the order had been served on Sano Sauro.

Anakin was sure that as soon as they gained access to Sauro's files, they would find the clue that would lead them to Omega.

Suddenly a Svivreni in a navy tunic burst into the vast room. His black hair flowed down his back, loosely held with a thick ring of dull metal. He was stocky and furred, his small, intense face screwed into an expression of nervous haste. He tried to modify his pace, but he ended up running and skidded to a stop before Obi-Wan and Anakin, his thin-soled boots sliding on the polished floor.

"I was tied up in a subcommittee hearing—" he said breathlessly.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "Doesn't matter. No news yet, Tyro."

Tyro Caladian shook his head rapidly. "How can that be? Something must be wrong."

Anakin frowned. He wasn't happy to hear Tyro say that.

"We had him in our grasp and he slipped away," Tyro moaned. "I can feel it."

"Nothing has happened yet," Obi-Wan said. "Have a seat before you fall down." A faint smile twitched at his mouth. Tyro's excitability amused the Jedi, but Tyro's vibrating nerves hid a political mind as sharp and cunning as a well-honed blade.

## Jude Watson

Tyro sat, sunk in gloom. He, too, was no fan of Sano Sauro. The Senator had attempted to take over the rich mines of Svivren for weapons development in a secret deal. The Svivreni were opposed to weaponry of any kind, and the deal was exposed before Sauro could complete his plan. He had covered his tracks well and they could not find proof to make an open accusation. It ate away at Tyro.

Tyro had worked together with Obi-Wan, making sure that they plugged every loophole. They had followed every item and sub-item of the procedure. They had notified, ratified, and petitioned. Obi-Wan had even enlisted the support of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

Despite Tyro's nerves, Anakin knew they'd prevail. He didn't understand why Tyro and Obi-Wan looked so worried.

Tyro blinked his small, bright eyes. "Sauro is pulling something. I wish I knew what it was."

Obi-Wan stirred. "I have a feeling we're about to find out."

Anakin quickly stood as the Speaker of the Senate, Mas Amede, strode into the room. He carried himself with his usual gravity, his hands clasped in front of him and his leathorns resting against the deep blue of his rich robes.

"Supreme Chancellor Palpatine has asked me to bring you this news," Mas Amede said after bowing to Obi-Wan. "Your order to reveal has been denied."

Anakin saw a flicker of anger in Obi-Wan's gaze, but it was gone in a moment. "On what grounds?"

"Senator Sauro has succeeded in utilizing a little-known procedural item called a sitting Senator's right of refusal," Mas Amede explained. "This has allowed him to block the order to reveal for an indefinite period. Senator Sauro is on an important committee on redistributing trade routes, and he petitioned the Senate Procedural Committee on that basis."

Tyro Caladian bristled. His fur stood out in sharp points. "I have never heard of a right of refusal," he said. "This is outrageous!"



## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

Mas Amedda stared at Tyro. It was clear he did not appreciate being lectured to by such a young aide. "It is a little-known rule, rarely used. The Committee had to go back three hundred years into the archives to find it."

"But procedural rules are discounted when they haven't been renewed and ratified within the last hundred years!" Tyro Caladian sputtered. "This is a clear violation!"

"It is a gray area," Mas Amedda admitted. "Technically the Committee is in charge of interpreting all rules, so they have the right to enforce them. It is a...surprising decision." He turned to face Obi-Wan squarely. "Senator Sauro must have wanted to block your order very badly."

"I'm sure that is so," Obi-Wan said.

Mas Amedda inclined his head. "The Supreme Chancellor wishes me to tell you that he did everything he could. He regrets the decision of the Committee but cannot overrule it. He hopes that you will be able to track Granta Omega some other way. He realizes that it is in the best interests of the galaxy for you to do so."

"Please extend my thanks to the Supreme Chancellor," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin could not believe his Master could keep his composure. To have come so close, and to be defeated by such a petty rule! It was unfair. How could his Master accept this ruling?

Mas Amedda bowed gravely, then walked slowly out the door, his heavy robe swinging.

Tyro's fur was still raised, and his small eyes snapped with fury. "I'll fight this," he told Obi-Wan. "He won't get away with it. I'll draft an appeal."

"Do what you can, my friend," Obi-Wan said. "Yet I believe you will not succeed. My guess is that Sauro got to someone on that committee. I think that was what Mas Amedda was insinuating." Obi-Wan put his hand on Tyro's shoulder. "Thank you for all your help. My Padawan and I will find another way."

## Jude Watson

Tyro looked crestfallen. “If ever you need me again, Master Kenobi, I am here for you.” He raised a furred hand, fingers spread, in the Svivreni gesture of goodbye. Then he hurried from the room.

“Master, Tyro is right,” Anakin said forcefully. “This is outrageous. Can’t we break into Sauro’s files?”

Obi-Wan folded his arms in the way that let Anakin know that he had gone too far.

“If we were discovered, it would undermine the Senators’ trust in the Jedi,” Obi-Wan said.

“There’s got to be something we can do!” Anakin exploded. “We can’t let him win. He’s probably laughing at us right now!”

Obi-Wan gave him a severe look. “You should not be concerned with Senator Sauro’s reaction. What does it matter if a corrupt man laughs at us? It should be less than the whisper of a gnatfly’s wings to us.”

Anakin stared at him. “He has made fools of us.”

“No, Padawan,” Obi-Wan said firmly. “If your path is the right one, no one has that power. Those who seek to make fools of others are fools themselves.”

“I don’t understand you,” Anakin said, shaking his head. “You are just as upset as I am. I can feel it, Master. I know how much you want to find Granta Omega.”

“Cultivate outward calm and inward calm will come,” Obi-Wan said. “This is the time when the Jedi lesson of inner balance can help you. Accept the setback, and move on.”

“How?” Anakin asked. “Where?”

“That is a question that is easy for me to answer,” Obi-Wan said. “The Council has called on us for a new mission.”

Anakin felt his anger drain away. “Do you know what it is?”

“No,” Obi-Wan said. “But I will admit this—wherever it takes us, I will be glad to take a break from Senatorial politics.”

## Chapter Two

To teach was easy. To be an example—well, that was another thing.

Obi-Wan had wanted to pound the floor and shake the very walls of the Senate. But with his Padawan by his side, he had too many reasons not to. He had drawn on his years of training in order to present a serene face to his apprentice. He knew Anakin struggled with his own patience. It would be damaging for Obi-Wan to show his frustration in front of him.

Anakin was sixteen years old. Impatience was wired into his being. Despite Anakin's strong Force connection, it would most likely take years before he developed true inner balance.

Obi-Wan, on the other hand, was supposed to have it already.

Obi-Wan drew a deep breath. It wasn't just the frustration of dealing with the Senate bureaucracy, blood-boiling as that was. It was the nagging feeling that if he didn't track down Granta Omega soon, their next meeting would be on Omega's terms. Obi-Wan didn't have anything concrete to go on. Yet he felt strongly that the darkness he felt around Omega somehow had to do with Anakin. The sense of urgency he felt was very real.

As they accessed the turbolift to the High Council tower, Ferus Olin walked up and nodded a greeting. As usual, the Jedi Padawan looked impeccable, his tunic spotless, his dark, gold-

## Jude Watson

streaked hair drawn back severely in his Padawan braid. Even his utility belt gleamed from a recent polishing.

Obi-Wan turned to him, surprised. “You have been called as well?”

“Yes. My Master will join us in the High Council chamber.”

They stepped onto the turbolift. Obi-Wan noted the cool nod Anakin gave in response to Ferus’s greeting. So the two were still rivals. Perhaps being thrown together again would be good for both of them.

The three stepped out and entered the Council chamber. A majority of the Council was there, surrounding the trio in a semicircle. Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows dark clouds collided, threatening rain. A sudden bolt of lightning flashed a jagged streak of blue against the dark gray sky.

Mace Windu turned from where he’d been contemplating the coming storm. He sat in his chair and faced Obi-Wan, Anakin, and Ferus.

“Thank you for coming so quickly,” he said. “This is a matter that demands our urgent response.”

Obi-Wan waited, surprised that Mace Windu had begun without Siri’s presence.

“There has been some infighting in the Senate,” Mace Windu began.

Obi-Wan felt a silent groan well up within him. So much for his desire to escape Senatorial politics.

“Senator Berm Tarturi of Andara is fighting the political battle of his life,” Mace continued. “The Andaran system is a thriving, influential one, but several planets in the system are claiming an imbalance in trade route distribution. The planet Ieria is demanding a new treaty, as well as representation in the Senate. Ieria and Andara have become bitter enemies. Senator Tarturi is concerned about a reduction in his own power, but the problem is bigger than that. Since the Andaran system is a powerful voting bloc, the Senate is worried about potential instability—as well as a full-scale civil war that could bring in other systems and spread

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

throughout the Core Worlds. And something else has happened to complicate the situation even more. The Senator's son has disappeared."

Mace paused, knitting his long fingers together. "Gillam Tarturi is sixteen. He is a student at the elite Leadership School on Andara—a private academy that trains many of the children of the powerful throughout the galaxy for careers in government and diplomacy. The school's security system is sophisticated. The fact that Gillam disappeared without tripping any alarms is a mystery."

"Does Senator Tarturi believe that his son's disappearance is tied to his political problems in his home system?" Obi-Wan asked.

"He does," Mace Windu said. "He fears his opponents have kidnapped Gillam in order to distract him."

Obi-Wan sensed a hesitation in Windu's manner, and he quickly glanced at the rest of the Council members. It was always difficult to read them, but he felt the uncertainty in the air.

"Difficult the situation is," Yoda said. "Interested we are in another connection. A squad of young mercenaries there is."

"The word is that the Leadership School serves as a training ground for this squad," Windu continued. "The young mercenaries have already been involved in several intra-planetary disputes and possibly even assassinations. They are alleged to hire themselves out for various causes around the galaxy. The disappearance of Gillam Tarturi could be related to this secret squad. Their activities are beginning to worry the Council."

"So they must be investigated as well," Obi-Wan said.

Mace Windu nodded. "The Council has arranged for both Anakin and Ferus to enter the school as new students. They are to find out who is behind the renegade squad and investigate them. Their identities will be concealed—no one must connect the Jedi to this operation if we are to succeed. Not even the school officials will know that Ferus and Anakin are Jedi—they have been given documentation as transfer students, Anakin on a

## Jude Watson

scholarship and Ferus as the son of a high official from a Mid-Rim planet.”

“And meanwhile I will investigate Andaran system politics,” Obi-Wan said. He tried to keep the thud of disappointment from his voice.

Mace Windu nodded again. “This will mean a separation between Master and Padawan. Not only for you, but for Siri as well. The Council is sending her to do some follow-up work on a planet in the Core. The Council feels that Ferus and Anakin together can handle this.” He turned to the two Padawans. “You will be undercover at all times, and that will prove difficult in ways you have yet to foresee. You can set up a regular time to communicate with Obi-Wan. Students are not allowed to use comm devices during the school day, but they have a free hour in the evenings. You must check in with each other as often as you can.”

“Yes, Master Windu,” Ferus said.

The doors hissed open and Siri walked in with her usual purposeful stride. She bowed to the Council. “I have received my last instructions and I’m ready to leave,” she said.

“You will be responsible for another Jedi’s Padawan,” Mace Windu told Obi-Wan. “You know what this means.”

“It is as if he is my own,” Obi-Wan said, looking at Siri. Her clear, deep blue gaze told him that she trusted him.

“May the Force be with you all,” Mace Windu concluded.

An hour later, the sky remained black and the clouds still refused to release the rain as Obi-Wan stood on the landing platform with Anakin. Ferus was already in the cruiser, doing a last-minute check. Obi-Wan would remain on Coruscant to investigate Tarturi’s rivals in the Senate. It was the place he had to start, but he did not relish the idea.

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

"I'm sorry to leave you, Master, but I know how much you're looking forward to returning to the Senate," Anakin said. The muscles around his mouth twitched as he tried not to smile.

"Very amusing," Obi-Wan said dryly. "I admit I would rather not have this particular assignment, but I recognize that it is necessary that it be done."

Anakin sighed. "Always an opportunity to teach."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, smiling now. "That is the role of a Master, my young apprentice." He put his hand on Anakin's shoulder. "Remember, you are not on a solo mission. You are with a fellow Jedi. Do your best with Ferus. Try to get to know him. That might ease your irritation with him."

"I would rather not have this particular assignment, but I recognize that it must be done," Anakin said with a straight face.

Obi-Wan laughed. He would miss Anakin's humor. Sometimes, he knew, he could be too serious. He remembered how Qui-Gon would sometimes surprise him on a tough mission with a sly joke.

*I must remember to do those things for Anakin,* he thought. *His gifts are so great that I work too hard to teach. He must learn to enjoy, as well.*

"Keep in close contact, Anakin," he said. "I will be on Andara as soon as I can. May the Force be with you."

"May the Force be with you, Master." Anakin turned and strode toward the Republic cruiser. Obi-Wan felt a tug at his heart that he recognized as a reluctance he did not like to admit.

The Council believed that Anakin was ready for more independence, but no doubt they had chosen Ferus as a counterbalance. His stability would keep Anakin's impulsiveness in check.

Or so they believed.

Obi-Wan watched the cruiser shoot into a space-lane, suddenly reverse engines, and drop into a lane several levels below between an airspeeder and an air taxi with barely a millimeter to spare. Obi-Wan shook his head ruefully. There was

## **Jude Watson**

no doubt in his mind that Anakin had suggested the close maneuver just to annoy Ferus.

He was glad Mace Windu had not seen it.

He watched the cruiser until it disappeared into the dusk. Yes, the Council was wise. Wiser than him. No doubt about that. Yet he knew his Padawan better than the Council, and his uneasiness gathered within him, as dark and heavy as the coming storm.



## Chapter Three

Andara was a beautiful world, lush and green with a temperate climate, tracts of wilderness, and wealthy cities. The Leadership School was on the outskirts of its capital city of Utare. The campus of the school took in rolling hills, green fields, and a lake. The grounds were ringed with an electro-charged security wall with observation towers and a particle shield. Roving surveillance droids made circuits of the property. Electro-bars covered the windows. Rich children usually attracted bounty hunters and other threats; the school meant to keep them out.

Anakin gazed behind him at the city buildings of Utare as they passed through the security checkpoint. He felt as though he were saying good-bye to freedom and entering a prison. Although there was security at the Temple, he never felt or saw its presence; he just felt safe.

Once they were inside the school and had received their class and room assignments, the feeling of oppression was meant to lift. The Leadership School was like a separate world. In many ways, it was more like a grand hotel than a place of learning.

It was built with gray stone imbedded with chunks of rare minerals that glinted blue and rose in the light. Costly woods were used for counters and desks. Each student had his or her own small but luxurious quarters. Expert chefs prepared the

## Jude Watson

food. The students had extensive exercise equipment and five pools of varying depths and temperatures. Everything was arranged for their comfort. It was very different from the Temple. The Temple was both grand and simple at the same time. Here, luxury was everywhere.

“If the body is pampered, the mind is free to concentrate,” Professor Aeradin told them as they toured the compound. He was an assistant dean and had been assigned to them for orientation. He was tall and thin, with a narrow head and four antennae that quivered when he grew excited. He was obviously proud of the school, and his antennae rarely stopped dancing.

But despite the teacher’s enthusiasm and the gleaming hallways, Anakin felt a steady pulse underneath it all that leadened the atmosphere with dread.

“Can you feel it?” he asked Ferus as they made their way to their rooms.

Ferus nodded. “Fear.”

Anakin said good-bye and opened the door to his small but exquisite suite. The sleep couch was piled with thick soft covers and a long counter held a variety of the latest tech learning devices.

All of the luxury was nice, he had to admit, but it made him uncomfortable. He liked simple things. And the luxury did not disguise the lack of freedom. The students were subject to strict security regulations. They could not leave the complex without authorization. The parents of the students paid a small fortune in order to ensure their children’s safety. Security had been stepped up since Gillam’s disappearance. Random checks were conducted and the whereabouts of the students had to be known at all times. Roving security droids zipped through the hallways, their cams constantly sweeping the air.

Yet Anakin knew these students did not feel safe here. The heavy surveillance didn’t bother them. They welcomed it. Daughters and sons of privilege, they were used to constant

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

attention. One of them had disappeared without warning. They all felt the chill of Gillam's absence.

He wasn't accustomed to keeping a low profile, but he tried to slip unnoticed through the halls as he went through the first few days of classes. He decided that his best strategy would be to cloak his abilities as much as possible. The more invisible he was, the more freedom he would have to examine others.

Slowly, he began to find it strange and liberating to be just another student. From the moment he had arrived at the Temple, he was whispered about. As the "Chosen One," the other students had kept an eye on his progress. Some were envious, some polite, some friendly, and some steered clear of him completely. But everyone noticed him. It was something that had been difficult for him in the beginning, but he had gotten used to it. Obi-Wan had told him that it was the best preparation for being a Jedi. He had to learn to screen out what others thought or speculated. He had to concentrate on his own path.

Around him were the elite leaders of tomorrow. They knew where they were going—on to positions of power in the galaxy, as Senators, rulers, heads of galactic corporations. Anakin marveled at their assurance, their expectation that their lives would be full of the same luxury and ease that had been theirs since childhood. At night, alone in his room, he admitted a strange new feeling into his heart: envy.

Anakin sat in the Great Hall of Learning with the rest of the school. Although individual classes were small, once a week the entire school would gather for a General Information Contest. The students sat in rows underneath a gilded dome. Professor Aeradin stood on a repulsorlift platform, manipulating a holographic projector. The questions and problems were presented as holograms, and the students answered on datapads at their seats.

## Jude Watson

Like all of the desks and chairs at the school, these seats were plush and comfortable. Anakin could press a button and the seat configured to his body. It reclined and swiveled so that he did not have to move his head to follow the holographic problems.

He glanced at the problem overhead but waited a few seconds before entering his answer. There were many good things about Jedi training at the Temple, but Anakin discovered another one—any other school was easy compared to it. He had slipped into his classes with no problems. His training at the Temple had included classes in galactic politics, diplomacy, and extensive study of languages, system geography, and astronomy. He could follow his classes at the Leadership School with less than his full attention. Being at an elite school felt odd, but at least he could keep up academically.

A hologram of a system spun over his head, while planet after planet was highlighted with a bright blue light. As each world was highlighted, the native language or dialect repeated the same sentence.

Anakin did not need to wait until the question was complete. He already had figured out the Mid-Rim system. It was Rearqu 10.

“Name the system,” Professor Aeradin said.

Anakin took his time entering his response. He watched the other students, noting who immediately entered an answer, who stared blankly at the system overhead, who tried to read what his neighbor had entered, and who whispered the answer to another. Then he entered his own.

*Rearqu 10* flashed holographically overhead. The professor repeated it as the number of right and wrong answers appeared on a screen at the front of the room.

“Only forty percent were correct,” Aeradin said severely. “Shameful.”

The next problem flashed overhead. Anakin noted Ferus entering the answer before the question had even finished flashing. The student sitting next to Ferus glanced at him

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

enviously, but Ferus's datapad was angled to prevent anyone from seeing what was on it. Anakin sighed. Even undercover, Ferus had to be the perfect student.

Anakin entered his own answer. Across the room, a petite human girl with dark hair twisted in a thick knot at the nape of her neck smiled at him. He smiled back. She was in his Political Philosophies class and he had already noticed how bright she was. She had a way of seeing all sides of an issue and looking for the deeper meaning.

The contest wore on. At last the questions ceased. Professor Aeradin totaled up the responses on his datapad and looked up.

"And the First Student today is..."

The name flashed holographically: FERUS OLIN

"I'd like to congratulate our new student, Ferus Olin, for his perfect score. His time was the best. Excellent work."

"Thank you, Professor Aeradin," Ferus said.

Suddenly another hologram rose next to Ferus's name. The light particles formed themselves into words, shining bigger and brighter: IS A SNOB

The auditorium exploded into laughter. Professor Aeradin looked up and saw the words. His gaze swept the auditorium while his antennae quivered with indignation.

"Who did this? Stand up this instant!"

The laughter slowly died, and the auditorium went still. Professor Aeradin's severe look traveled from student to student, trying to flush out the culprit.

Anakin drew on the Force to help him. He noted movement, whispers, a shift, a squirm. He felt the undercurrents in the room—suppressed laughter, nervousness. Impatience. Boredom. Hunger.

*Triumph.*

His gaze shifted to a short, scruffy human boy who sat staring innocently at Professor Aeradin.

The professor hesitated. "If I ever find out..."

## Jude Watson

His words were drowned out by a soft dinging. A voice rose from the hidden speakers. "End of contest. Five minutes to mod four. Five minutes."

"Dismissed," Professor Aeradin said helplessly, for the students had already risen, grabbing their datapads and talking and jostling as they surged toward the doors.

Anakin headed in the direction of the short boy. His sandy hair stuck up in bristles and it was easy to keep track of him. Anyone who could infiltrate a professor's holographic projector in order to conduct a practical joke might know something about bypassing security.

He noted that around him, students walked in groups or pairs. This boy walked alone.

"That was pretty wizard," Anakin said, falling into step beside the boy.

"What?" The boy shot him a surprised look from intelligent gray eyes.

"The hologram. You did it." Anakin waved a hand. "Don't worry, I won't tell. I'm impressed." He gave the boy a friendly grin. "Anakin Skywalker."

The boy hesitated. "Reymet Autem."

"So how did you do it?" Anakin asked.

"It's all in the wrist." Reymet mimicked entering items in a datapad and grinned. His gray eyes glinted. "Easy for a boy genius, my friend."

They headed down the hallway together. Anakin felt rather than saw Ferus fall in behind them.

Reymet waved a hand around him. "Welcome to the comfiest jail in the galaxy. It's not much, but we call it home."

"So how do you have fun around here?" Anakin asked.

Reymet shrugged. "I make my own fun."

The noise of the students anxiously hurrying toward lunch covered their words. "Must be hard, with all the security around here," Anakin remarked. He was pushing gently, trying to get Reymet to open up.

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

Reymet snorted. "Security isn't as secure as the experts say it is. There are ways to get around any system."

"It seems pretty tight to me," Anakin remarked casually.

Several students glanced at Anakin curiously as they passed by. Reymet shoved his datapad into his pocket with a rough gesture. "You'd better not be seen talking to me. Nobody talks to me."

"What about your friends?" Anakin asked.

Reymet scowled. "I don't have friends." He quickened his pace and disappeared into the crowd.

Ferus appeared next to Anakin. "Interesting."

"You heard?"

"Every word. I pick up something from him..."

"Me too. Not a darkness. Maybe just...confusion."

"He has something to hide," Ferus declared. "It could be anything, though. It isn't much of a clue."

"It's a place to start," Anakin said.

## Chapter Four

The dining hall was a paneled room with soft, recessed lighting and thick red veda cloth hangings at the windows that muffled sound and cast a rosy glow on the diners. It was just like the exclusive restaurants Anakin had glimpsed on Coruscant—just like the spots the students were used to eating in, he was sure. And, like an exclusive restaurant, seating in the dining hall was subject to an unspoken code.

It hadn't taken Anakin long to realize that the best tables were by the windows and he was not welcome there. He didn't know why he felt a coolness from most of the students, but he definitely felt it. When he was looking for a seat at a table, an empty chair would be pushed aside to another table, or a datapad or a pile of durasheet notes would be quickly placed on the seat. It was clear that no one wanted to sit with him. There was a power elite in the school, and everyone else fell in around it.

Yet Ferus had been accepted almost immediately, and had his pick of places to sit. Was it because word had gotten out that he belonged to a powerful family on his homeworld?

*You can travel to the ends of the galaxy and it will be the same—those with power do not like to share.*

His Master had told him that once, in a voice of weary resignation. But sometimes Obi-Wan seemed to forget that



## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

Anakin had been a slave. If anyone knew about power, it was a slave. He knew about the hunger for it, and he knew about the humiliation of getting your nose rubbed in the fact that you didn't have it.

He took his bowl of aromatic stew to an empty table and sat. It wasn't that he needed company. Jedi were comfortable being alone. But inside, something burned, something deep and hot that he had hoped had been long forgotten. He took a bite of stew and tasted shame and anger. It was hard to swallow, like a mouthful of sand.

He reached inside the pocket of his tunic and withdrew a small, smooth stone. It was a river rock, a present from Obi-Wan. It had belonged to Qui-Gon.

The rock was Force-sensitive, but that was not why Anakin reached for it during times of stress. When he rubbed his fingers along the smooth surface, it was as though he was able to draw on Qui-Gon's core of serenity. He thought of cool river water falling over his body, of turning his body like a fish and gliding in the deep green river, and his mind would go still. He and Ferus had to hide their lightsabers in their rooms, and the rock was the only physical connection to his real life.

A plate suddenly plunked down next to him. The same girl who had smiled at him in the General Information Contest pulled a stray chair over with her foot with the ease of an athlete. She sat down and sniffed appreciatively at her stew, then picked up her spoon. Anakin quickly slid the stone underneath the lip of his bowl, where it could not be seen.

"So, is this the enriching experience they promised you in the brochure?" the girl asked. "Students who are completely spooked snub you?" Her brown eyes twinkled at him. They were deep and warm and reminded him of another girl, more beautiful than this one—a queen, in fact. He saw the same intelligence, the same confidence. That memory more than the girl's friendliness, more than the river stone, dissolved the knot of anger in his belly.

## Jude Watson

The girl dug into her food with her spoon and swallowed an enormous bite. "Don't worry. It gets better."

"It does?"

She grinned. "You graduate." She stuck out her hand. "Marit Dice."

He shook it. "Anakin Skywalker."

"You're in my Political Philosophies class. You don't say much."

"You do."

She took another bite. "I have opinions," she said, shrugging. "The teachers think I'm too smart for my own good. Which doesn't matter much, because they don't matter. They won't give any scholarship student a good reference, anyway."

"Why not?" Anakin asked. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Reymet leaning against a wall. Anakin noticed that Reymet was watching as Professor Aeradin forked up a large bite of lunch. Aeradin was supposed to be patrolling the dining hall, but he had filled up his plate from the buffet. Anakin had noticed that most teachers did this. He guessed that the students' food was much better than what was given to the teachers.

"Because they only give good references to the elite students," Marit said. She tore off a chunk of bread and dipped it in her bowl, then took a bite. "You should see what happens before graduation. The fathers and mothers and benefactors come, and they give the teachers presents. I mean, real presents. Like a landspeeder. Or tickets on a resort starship. Things like that. And suddenly their little darling winds up as a Senatorial aide." She waved the bread in the air.

Reymet suddenly reached for a custard tart and darted out of the room. Ferus signaled Anakin, then slipped out after Reymet.

Anakin would have liked to keep talking to this interesting girl, but he and Ferus had agreed to keep Reymet under surveillance. "That's too bad," Anakin said. "I think I need more tea. Will you excuse me for a minute?"

Marit shrugged again. "Sure."

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

Anakin hoped he hadn't been rude. He gave a quick glance to Professor Aeradin, still smacking his lips over his food, then slipped out the door. He saw Ferus at the end of the hallway and hurried up to him.

"Did you lose him?"

"He went into a restricted area," Ferus said. He pointed to a door that seemed closed until Anakin noticed that a tiny wedge had been placed between the edge of the door and the wall.

He leaned over to examine it. It was a small, flexible piece of transparisteel that was almost invisible. When he pushed on the edge, the door opened just enough for him to slip a hand inside. He reached around and felt for the controls. He pressed the button and the door slid open.

"Pretty clever," he said.

"It's the teacher's quad, so it's not alarmed," Ferus said. "I wonder what he's doing in there."

"Let's find out." Anakin hurried through the doorway. As soon as Ferus was through, he positioned the wedge and pressed the button to close the door. It slid almost shut.

"What if we get caught?" Ferus said. "We could get confined to our rooms between classes. How will we investigate?"

"Pretty simple. We'll have to avoid getting caught," Anakin said.

The hallway was empty. They proceeded, making no sound. Teachers' offices lined the walls, all of them unoccupied. The teachers were in class or monitoring the students. At the end of the hall was a door marked TEACHERS' LOUNGE. It was slightly ajar. Anakin put his eye against the crack.

Reymet had the custard tart between his teeth as he slipped a flat disk into a datapad and then placed it in a cabinet marked AERADIN. He closed the cabinet door and then punched several numbers into a pad at the side. Anakin heard a lock click.

Chewing, Reymet began to absently leaf through some durasheets left on the cabinet. Anakin eased back and motioned to Ferus.

## Jude Watson

“So that’s how he infiltrated Professor Aeradin’s hologram test,” Anakin whispered. “He’s pretty clever. He must have stolen Aeradin’s disk when Aeradin was at lunch.”

Ferus nodded. “He sure knows how to get around security measures. I think one of us should keep an eye on him. He’s in two of my classes. I’ll do it.”

It was a logical conclusion, but Anakin still felt annoyed. Ferus hadn’t really consulted him. It was more like he was thinking out loud. It was typical of Ferus’s high-handed behavior, and yet he expected Anakin to cooperate with him without complaint. He knew if he told Obi-Wan this, his Master would brush aside his feelings and say that the mission was more important and that inner balance could not be attained without serenity.

This was all true, but Anakin would bet on one thing—when Obi-Wan was a Padawan, he didn’t have to deal with anyone like Ferus Olin.

Anakin and Ferus hurried back to the dining hall. They knew that Reymet would be returning as well. Soon the midday meal would be over.

Students were beginning to gather their things and start for their classes as Anakin entered the dining hall and returned to his table. Marit was gone. He slid his fingers underneath his still-full bowl. So was his river stone.

## Chapter Five

Obi-Wan was ushered immediately into Berm Tarturi's private office. The Senator from Andara had a grand suite hung with delicate curtains of silver and gold shimmersilk. The different flowers of Andara were stitched with bright crimson thread into the fabric. Instead of a desk or table, Berm Tarturi sat on a platform with plush cushions. The platform had a work surface that swiveled up from underneath so that one could recline and work at the same time.

Tarturi was a large man with a bald head and a flowing black beard. He looked up at Obi-Wan, and the misery on his face was a contrast to the luxurious surroundings.

"I have heard from them at last." He pushed a datascreen toward Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan walked forward to read it.

WE HAVE YOUR SON. WAIT FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.

On the screen was an image of a tall, muscular boy clutching a blanket around his shoulders. His mouth was twisted in a way that told Obi-Wan he was trying to be brave.

Obi-Wan felt his fury rise at the sight, but he kept his voice neutral. "Not much to go on," he said.

Berm dropped his head in his hands. "They are trying to torture me. There is a personal vendetta here. I can feel it."

## Jude Watson

"Do you suspect who it is?" Obi-Wan asked.

"It is Rana Halion," Berm said. "I'm sure of it. She's the driving force behind those who wish to overthrow the Andaran trade system. She's the ruler of Ieria, the next largest planet to Andara. I've known her for years. She's a ruthless politician. She has assembled a secret army and has persuaded several other worlds to join the effort. She is now at the Senate, lobbying for help for her cause. She claims the Andaran system needs two representatives in the Senate. She's trying to grab power, nothing more. She says she speaks for the majority of those in the Andaran system. It is a lie! *I* am the Senator of Andara. She will stop at nothing to get what she wants."

"She would kidnap a young boy?" Obi-Wan asked. "That is a serious charge, Senator."

He looked up at Obi-Wan bleakly. "She is a serious person. What are rules and laws to her? I'm positive that she or her supporters have broken into my office and looked through my files."

"Was security breached?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No, but I know she was here! Someone was!" Berm insisted. "I'm telling you, she has my son. What are you going to do about it?" Berm's voice had risen shrilly.

"I am here to find your son," Obi-Wan said calmly. "I will investigate what you have told me. Accusing her without proof would get us nowhere. And you don't want to endanger Gillam."

Berm slumped back against the cushions. "No, of course not. I haven't brought in Coruscant security because they are so heavy-handed. I knew the Jedi could handle this discreetly. It's just that I fear for Gillam. He thinks he is an adult. He is only sixteen." He glanced at the datascreen and his gaze softened.

"I know what that is like," Obi-Wan said, thinking of Anakin.

"We must find him soon," Berm said.

"Do you have enemies in the Senate?" Obi-Wan inquired.

Berm shook his head.

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

"I find that hard to believe, Senator," Obi-Wan said. "All politicians have enemies."

"Not me," Berm shot back. "Oh, I suppose I have political disagreements with my colleagues. But enemies? I do not cultivate them."

"We do not need to cultivate enemies," Obi-Wan said. "They flourish without us." He sensed that Berm Tarturi did not want to answer the question, so he tried a different tack. "Tell me about security at the Leadership School."

"I demanded a report from them that includes the data recorders from that night," Berm said. He reached over for a holofile. "Here is the report." He thrust it at Obi-Wan eagerly. "Perhaps you can find something in it. I couldn't. I had the best security experts go over it. I chose the Leadership School not only because of its reputation, but because of its security. It rivals the best in the galaxy. How could Gillam just disappear? That's what makes me think that Rana is responsible. She has a planetary treasury to draw on. She could hire the most sophisticated tech team in the galaxy to override the system. Didn't she break in here without tripping the alarm?"

Obi-Wan took a quick look at the holofile in his hands. "Everything seems in order, but I'll have the analysts at the Temple go over this. How often do you communicate with your son normally?"

"Almost every night. The school has a contact hour in the evenings. Otherwise he is on comm silence."

Obi-Wan knew this. Students were restricted in use of communication devices except for a one-hour period. It was the time he had set up to speak with Anakin and Ferus.

"We're very close," Berm went on. "His mother died three years ago."

Obi-Wan looked down at the security report. "It says here that you last checked in with Gillam over a month ago."

## Jude Watson

Berm flushed. "There are many details at the Senate that require my attention. That doesn't mean I'm not close to my son."

"Did Gillam have special friends at the school?"

"Of course. He's very popular."

"What are their names?"

Berm looked at him blankly. "Ah...let me see. Hmm. I don't recall. The stress of this whole affair has been so great, it's hard to remember every detail..."

"How about vacations? Where did Gillam spend his?"

"With me, of course. Unless my duties here prevented him from joining me. Then he would spend vacations at our mountain home on Andara."

"By himself?"

"Of course not. There were servants in attendance."

Obi-Wan nodded. He was beginning to get the picture of a lonely boy.

Berm seemed to sense this, for he said quickly, "But he loved coming here to visit me. He was just here a month ago. He wants to be a Senator, like me. We are very close."

"Of course," Obi-Wan said. "Let me take this message with me, and I'll keep you updated."

"Anything I can do for my son, I will do," Berm said.

"I appreciate that, Senator Tarturi," Obi-Wan replied. He believed that the Senator was sincere. But he did *not* believe that Tarturi had told him everything. Senators were used to concealing some of the truth in order to place themselves in the best light. It was their nature. He needed a clear view of Senator Tarturi's role in the Senate, and he knew just who to ask.

Obi-Wan tried to access the door to Tyro Caladian's tiny office, but the door stuck after it had slid open only a few centimeters.

"Tyro?" he shouted inside the crack.



## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

“Go away,” a muffled voice answered.

“It’s Obi-Wan!”

“Obi-Wan! For star’s sake, don’t move.” Obi-Wan heard the sound of crashing and banging. “I’m coming—oof! Don’t...I’m almost there...ah!”

The door slowly opened, pushed by Tyro. “Can’t you...” he puffed “...use your Force...to help?”

Obi-Wan leaned against the door frame, watching. “I’m enjoying this too much.”

Tyro got the door all the way open. He wiped his forehead, where his fur had matted with sweat. “So happy to amuse. Thanks.”

Obi-Wan strolled inside. Tyro’s office was filled with plastoid boxes crammed with durasheet documents. More plastoid file boxes were stacked against a wall. Some of the boxes had been shoved against the door, causing it to jam. “What’s going on?”

“I told you I’d get something on Sano Sauro,” Tyro said, climbing over a box to get to a holodocument-strewn desk. “I requisitioned all the documents in the Senate registry that involve his homeworld. He couldn’t seal everything, just his personal docs.”

“All of them?” Obi-Wan asked incredulously. “But he’s been a Senator for nine years!”

Tyro ruefully surveyed the crowded office. “Well, it might take a while. But what can I do for you, Obi-Wan? I’m at your service, as always.”

“What do you know about Berm Tarturi?” Obi-Wan asked. He raised a hand and used the Force to push aside a tower of documents in order to sit down.

Tyro looked from the ease of Obi-Wan’s gesture back to the door he had struggled with. His ears twitched as he sat down. “I sure could use that Force of yours. Think how I could save on maid service. Anyway—Tartun. The one whose son has been kidnapped.”

## Jude Watson

Obi-Wan was startled. “How do you know that? There’s been no official word.”

Tyro smiled, his small, pointed teeth glistening. “Why are you in this office?”

Obi-Wan inclined his head. “Because you hear everything.”

“What exactly do you need to know?” Tyro said. “I know many things about Senator Tarturi. For example, at the moment he is engaged in the fight of his political career.”

“Who is his biggest enemy in the Senate?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Are you serious?” Tyro said. “You don’t know?”

“Why else would I be here?” Obi-Wan asked irritably. “Because I enjoy filing?”

“*Sano Sauro* is his biggest enemy,” Tyro said.

“Sauro?” Obi-Wan felt his pulse quicken. “Tarturi didn’t mention him.”

Tyro snorted. “He wouldn’t. They are locked in a bitter battle over the redistribution of trade routes. Typical Senate bureaucratic tangle, but for them—it might as well be life or death. It means money, payoffs...and reelection. The battle has left them mortal enemies.”

“But why wouldn’t Tarturi tell me this?” Obi-Wan wondered.

“Because Senators never admit they have enemies, Obi-Wan,” Tyro said patiently. “Don’t you know that by now? It gives their opponents more power if they acknowledge them.”

“Even when his son is missing?”

Tyro laughed, but the laugh had no humor in it. “His mother could be missing, his wife, and his pet nek battle dog. He still wouldn’t tell you everything.”

“So,” Obi-Wan said thoughtfully, “if Berm Tarturi was distracted by his son’s kidnapping...”

“Sauro could profit handsomely,” Tyro finished. “The committee is in session right now. If Tarturi misses even one meeting, Sauro could gain the upper hand.” Tyro sat up straighter. “Do you think Sauro could be involved?”

“Does Sauro know Rana Halion?” Obi-Wan asked.

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

“The leader of the Andaran opposition? I don’t think so,” Tyro answered. “But if he did meet with her, it would have to be in secret. Naturally he would support her efforts in the Andaran system. It would destroy Tarturi’s power base.” Tyro tapped a triple-jointed finger on a pile of datasheets. “Not to mention that Halion could get her new trade routes if she throws her support to Sauro. They both have much to gain from an alliance.”

“So if Halion cooked up a plot to kidnap Gillam Tarturi, Sauro might help,” Obi-Wan said.

Tyro nodded. “My enemy’s enemy is my friend, you mean.”

“Or he could have cooked up the plot and enlisted her. It is certainly something he is capable of.”

Tyro’s ears twitched excitedly. “If we could find proof, it would mean the end of his career. I’d have him in prison. And you’d have your files. The block of the order to reveal would be dissolved.”

“And we’d find Gillam Tarturi,” Obi-Wan said.

## Chapter Six

“Today we shall consider the geopolitical effect of the great Lali Plague,” Professor Win Totem said. Then she sat down with great dignity, right on a custard turnover.

The class exploded with laughter. It went on a little too long, Anakin noted. The constant anxiety the students felt led them to grasp at any relief.

The tall professor with the regal bearing stood and regarded the ruby-colored stain on the back of her white septsilk gown.

“Ferus Olin,” she rapped out. “You are responsible for this!”

Ferus started. “I assure you, Professor, I am not.”

“Ten more demerits for lying,” Professor Win Totem barked. Her blue skin flushed an angry purple. “You are the only one who could have done it. I asked you to distribute the notes before class.”

Anakin watched as Ferus clenched his hands. He knew what Ferus was thinking. Ferus and Reymet had distributed the notes together. They did everything together now. Flattered by Ferus’s attention, Reymet had become his tagalong. But Reymet couldn’t resist playing his practical jokes, and Ferus was getting blamed. Anakin also knew that Ferus could not point the finger at Reymet. He was trying to befriend him. Besides, if Ferus told on

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

Reymet, he'd be a tattletale, what the students called a womp fink.

Reymet's face was pure innocence. He shook his head with concern as he studied the stain on Professor Totem's gown.

Totem turned back to the lesson. Anakin hid his grin as he bent over his datascreen. It served Ferus right. He had grabbed the assignment to watch Reymet. He deserved the consequences. Anakin couldn't imagine two people more unlike each other than Ferus and Reymet. He knew that the secret pleasure he got from watching Ferus being blamed for a practical joke wasn't very Jedi-like, but on the other hand, he couldn't wait to tell his friends Tru and Darra that Ferus had gotten demerits for putting a custard turnover on a teacher's chair.

Out of the corner of his vision, he saw Marit eyeing him curiously. He had been playing a waiting game with her. After he'd discovered that his stone was missing, his first impulse was to rush after her and demand it back. It was his most precious possession, and he hated being without it.

But he had stopped himself. What would Obi-Wan have done?

*Take a breath and think, Anakin.*

So he asked himself why Marit had taken it. She must have known that he would immediately realize that she had it. Did she want to provoke a confrontation? Did she want to see what he would do?

Anakin had decided to wait. Not the easiest course of action for him. Not at all. But he was puzzled and intrigued by Marit, and he wanted her to feel the same. Let Ferus chase after Reymet. Anakin's instincts told him that there was more to Marit than he knew.

So even though he felt her eyes on him, he didn't turn. Nor did he acknowledge her when Professor Totem had them break into groups and Marit joined his. He didn't respond when she tried to catch his eye, even during the most boring stretch of the professor's lecture.

## Jude Watson

She would come to him, he knew. After the class, she would find a pretext to talk to him. He was driving her crazy because he had waited her out.

*Better to wait to catch your prey than strike too soon.*

Obi-Wan had counseled him again and again on the virtue of patience. At last he was beginning to understand why his Master pushed it. It worked. Sometimes.

The class ended. Anakin headed out the wide carved door. He left the hallway and accessed the brushed durasteel doors that led to the courtyard. Even though it was overlooked by windows, it felt removed. It was a gloomy, dark day, and he had it to himself. Students avoided isolated places now. They traveled in pairs or groups and went directly to their classes.

“All right, I give up the battle,” Marit said from behind him.

He turned. “I didn’t know we were in a war.”

She held up the stone. “You know I have this. Don’t you want it back?”

“Yes,” Anakin said. Even in the gloom, the river stone shone, its shiny black surface like a mirror full of reflected light.

“And you didn’t report me.”

“No.”

“This stone is important to you. I can tell. Why?”

“It was a gift,” Anakin said.

“From your father?”

Longing burst inside him. He did not have a father. Shmi had been very clear about that. He didn’t understand it, but he accepted it. He did not think about his lack; he never had. But unexpectedly the ache would well up in him and take him by surprise.

Then he thought of Obi-Wan, and the ache went away.

“Yes,” he said. “Are you going to give it back?”

She held it up, fingering it thoughtfully. “I’m not sure yet.”

It would be so easy for him to use the Force to get it back. Instead, Anakin moved. His kick barely grazed her fingertips, but

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

it dislodged the stone and sent it flying straight toward him. He reached up with one hand and caught it.

Marit blinked. She looked down at her hand, still outstretched but now empty. “I didn’t even see you move. How did you do that?”

Anakin slid the stone back into the concealed inside pocket of his tunic. “Lots of practice. Now it’s your turn to answer questions. Why did you take it?”

Her dark eyes glinted. “Because I wanted to see what you would do.”

“A test,” Anakin said. “Did I pass?”

Marit only smiled and changed the subject. “I saw you in the flight simulator the other day. You were pretty good.”

It was the one area where he had not hidden his skill. It was hard for Anakin to sit in a cockpit and not fly fast and expertly. “Thanks.”

“I’d like you to meet some friends of mine. Will you come with me now? It’s our free mod.”

Anakin nodded. Marit may not have answered his question about passing her test, but she didn’t need to. He had passed. The question was, for what purpose?

## Chapter Seven

Obi-Wan stared down at the holofile in front of him. He flipped through the data for what felt like the thousandth time. He couldn't find the key.

Something had happened the night Gillam disappeared, yet the security record showed that nothing had been breached. Obi-Wan had gone over the report. The best security expert at the Temple, Jedi Knight Alam Syk, had gone over it. Nothing was out of the ordinary. It was as though Gillam had disappeared into thin air.

Obi-Wan had also gone over the short note sent by the kidnappers. It was strange that they had not asked for credits or made any demands. The note seemed more like a delaying tactic than anything else. There was a chance the note could be linked to a particular datapad, but until they had a suspect, they could do nothing with it.

Obi-Wan looked at the security report again. He had the nagging feeling that he was missing something obvious.

His comlink signaled, and he answered it brusquely. "Yes?"

Tyro's excited voice vibrated through the air. "I've got something. I analyzed the data from the past five years of Sauro's illicit activity—the stuff he's been caught at, anyway—and ran it through my probabilities program, looking for connections. I



## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

narrowed his secret meeting places to three. Then I cross-referenced his schedule and committee meetings, and—”

“Tyro,” Obi-Wan said with great patience, “please, get to the point.”

“He’s meeting Rana Halion secretly,” Tyro said in a rush.

“Now?”

“I think so. I’m following her right now, and she’s heading to a place he’s used for secret meetings in the past. It’s just a hunch, but—”

“Tell me where,” Obi-Wan demanded.

Tyro gave him the directions. Obi-Wan rushed out of the Temple. He took one of the Temple’s speeders and raced through the jammed space lanes of Coruscant, diving several hundred levels below to a grassy quad surrounded by stores and cafés. He parked the speeder and quickly hurried to the prearranged spot where Tyro was waiting.

Tyro sat in a crowded café under an awning that cast deep shade. From here he had a view of the quad seating. With a nod at Tyro, Obi-Wan sat next to him and surveyed the area.

It was a wise choice of location for a secret meeting, he thought. The many stores and cafés made for crowded passageways. There were numerous entrances and exits, and several busy space lanes converged nearby. Glass turbolifts connected to levels above and below. If someone needed to get lost quickly, it would be easy to do.

“There she is,” Tyro said in a low tone. “Right on schedule.”

Obi-Wan looked curiously at Rana Halion. He had studied her image in her docs, but she appeared more commanding in person. Dressed to blend with the crowd, she was wearing a brown traveler’s cloak with a hood. She was a tall, lanky humanoid with white hair cut short and twisted into spikes. Wide gold cuffs encircled each strong wrist. Even from this distance, he noted the intensity of her eyes, a blue so light they were almost colorless.

## Jude Watson

She strolled around the quad, glancing in shop windows. To a casual passerby, she appeared to be window-shopping. But Obi-Wan saw how her glance continually darted to the seats on the quad. She was definitely waiting for someone.

Tyro ordered a round of drinks so that they wouldn't be conspicuous. Obi-Wan sipped his juice, alert for any sign of Sano Sauro. The minutes ticked by.

He could see the impatience in Rana Halion's walk. Her hands twisted together, then relaxed. She sat for several minutes, then got up to stroll again.

"Where is he?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I don't know," Tyro fretted. "I'm certain he's meeting her. It's too much of a coincidence, her being in this place. You'd think if you go to all the trouble of putting someone under surveillance that they would cooperate. How can Sauro do this to us? It's like he knows we're here."

Obi-Wan suppressed a groan. He held out his hand. "Let me see your comlink."

Tyro handed it to him. "What is it?"

Obi-Wan took out his own comlink and contacted Alam Syk at the Temple. "Can you run a trace on this?" he asked, reading off the data from Tyro's comlink.

Within seconds, Alam answered, "It's got a trace on it. Coming from...the Senate. Hang on..." Obi-Wan heard data keys clicking. Alam could trace any signal. "Hmmm. Do you know a Senator Sano Sauro? It looks like he's interested in what Tyro Caladian is up to."

Obi-Wan tossed the comlink back to Tyro. "There's your answer. I suggest that you do a routine sweep of your comlink transmission security in the future."

"I was never important enough before to need to do so," Tyro said. "I guess that's a good sign."

"Except that we lost our chance to trap Sauro," Obi-Wan said.

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

Across the quad, a disgusted Rana Halion strode off and hailed an air taxi.

“What next?” Tyro asked. “I doubt Sauro will use any of the usual places again.”

“Which is why it’s time to confront him directly,” Obi-Wan said. “Time is running out for Gillam.”

Sano Sauro was at a Senate function attended by many dignitaries. Obi-Wan and Tyro slipped easily into the crowd. Obi-Wan spotted Sano Sauro and made his way over to listen. Tyro joined a group surrounding Berm Tarturi.

“So glad you could join us after all,” a Senator was saying to Sauro. “The commemoration of the dedication of the plaque on the south-facing wall of the main north-south corridor of the northeast wing of Complex B is an important step forward in promoting the harmony of the galaxy.”

“I agree,” Sauro said smoothly. “Another plaque with a quotation concerning the necessity for peace will certainly heal the many bloody, savage conflicts.”

The other Senator proudly puffed out his scaly green cheeks. “The artisans of my home system were responsible for the plaque.”

“Then I am doubly sure it will do its job,” Sauro answered. There was no trace of irony in his tone, Obi-Wan noted, but Sauro managed to convey it. Yet the apparent sincerity of his tone would make it difficult to challenge him. So did his impassive expression. The skin was stretched so tightly over the bones of his face that he rarely registered an emotion.

He caught sight of Obi-Wan. “Will you excuse me?”

Sauro suddenly headed for the exit, slithering through the crowd with the expertise of one used to escaping dull gatherings. Obi-Wan started after him, but suddenly Berm Tarturi’s voice boomed out. Sauro stopped abruptly but did not turn.

## Jude Watson

“How kind of you to say that,” Berm said to the group of Senators surrounding him. “No, I’m trying to keep it very quiet. It is a private matter. Yet others seek to exploit my sorrow. Oh, it’s not that I expect special treatment, but those who would take advantage of a father’s despair...” Tyro raised his eyebrows at Obi-Wan. Obviously, Tarturi abandoned discretion when he could gain sympathy.

Obi-Wan saw Sauro’s sneer. He was contemptuous of Tarturi’s tactics.

Sauro turned. His voice, hard as ice, cut through Berm’s blustering like a laser. “Yes, anyone who exploits private pain is despicable.” He gave Tarturi a withering look. “No matter who does it.”

The Senators looked back and forth between the two enemies, some with apprehension, others avidly looking forward to a war of words. Tyro’s eyes gleamed, no doubt hoping Sauro would let something slip in anger. But Sauro simply turned his back on Tarturi and slipped off through the crowd, a slim figure in black.

A group of Senators suddenly converged on Berm Tarturi while others faded back, and it took Obi-Wan several precious seconds to extricate himself from the crowd. When he pushed his way out the door, Sauro had already disappeared. Obi-Wan headed toward Sauro’s suite of offices.

As soon as he entered, Sauro’s personal assistant stood up. “He isn’t here.”

“Did he tell you to say that?” Obi-Wan brushed past him, heading for the door.

“I am calling security.”

“Your choice.” Obi-Wan had no more patience for protocol. He waved a hand and used the Force to slide open the door to Sauro’s inner office.

Sauro turned, startled, as Obi-Wan strode in. “This is outrageous!” he sputtered, losing his usual cool.

“You are meeting with Rana Halion secretly,” Obi-Wan said.

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

“You don’t have any evidence of that,” Sauro said, regaining his composure.

“I have evidence that you put Tyro Caladian under surveillance,” Obi-Wan continued.

Sauro stood behind his long desk. He was not a tall man, but the desk was low to the ground in order to give that impression. The tall red thorns of the claing bush rose from the corners, stabbing the air. His thin lips twisted as he leaned forward, resting on his knuckles. “And why shouldn’t I? I don’t take kindly to being investigated by young upstart attorneys. I have a legitimate concern as to who exactly this Caladian is and what he wants. The risk of assassination and sabotage are part of this job, and I must take any steps I can to protect myself. If you wish to take it up with the Senate security committee, do so.”

“You rely on those committees,” Obi-Wan said. “No doubt because you have bribed your way onto most of them.”

“What is this personal vendetta you have against me, Kenobi?” Sauro’s voice purred now. “I must confess, I don’t understand it. I’ve done nothing to antagonize you. Perhaps I should bring you up on charges.”

“What charges?”

“Breaking and entering, for one,” Sauro said, his gaunt face expressionless. “The Force is a weapon like any other.”

“The Force is not a weapon,” Obi-Wan snapped. “Let me warn you, Sauro. I am investigating Gillam Tarturi’s kidnapping. If I find you had anything to do with it—”

Sauro laughed. “A child’s kidnapping! Hardly something I would dabble in. You are grasping at straws, Kenobi. And once again you are wasting my time.” He picked up his comlink and stabbed at a button with his index finger. “I think I will report you for harassment. Perhaps a few hours of being detained by Senate security will help you calm down.”

“Your threats reveal your fear,” Obi-Wan said. “I’ll be back.”

## Chapter Eight

Marit's friends sat together on the athletic field outside. They seemed to be expecting Anakin. He noted one friend looking him over carefully, from the top of his head to his boots. The student, a Bothan, stood as soon as they came up.

"So this is the one," he said. He was short, shorter than Marit, and the curling hair down to his shoulders gave him a soft look that was undercut by his shrewd gaze. This was clearly not someone to underestimate.

"This is Anakin," Marit said. "Anakin, meet Rolai Frac. And this is Tulah, and Hurana, and Ze."

"Have you ever ridden a swoop?" Ze asked. He was a humanoid, short and plump, with close-set green eyes and two pigtailed that hung down his back. He seemed eager for action.

"A couple of times," Anakin said.

"We were going to have a swoop race," Tulah said. Anakin recognized the elongated head and pale skin of a native of Muunilinst. Tulah was tall and skinny, with a shock of bright yellow hair that stuck straight up from his head. His voice was all business. "Do you want to join us?"

"Just once around the school grounds," Marit said.

"Sounds like fun," Anakin said.

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

“The only thing is, it’s technically against the rules,” Hurana said. She gave him a shy smile, but he could tell he was being tested. “You’re going to have to avoid the roving surveillance droids.”

“Sounds even better,” Anakin said.

Marit pointed to a nearby swoop with her chin. “That’s yours, then. Watch out for professors and security cameras. Let’s go.”

Marit and her friends slung their legs over their swoops. Anakin followed. He took a moment to get used to the swoop controls and was a few seconds behind them. He wasn’t worried. He knew how to fly a swoop faster than anyone.

He took off after them, streaking across the gray sky. Ahead was a security checkpoint. Anakin could see the camera lenses revolving. Marit gunned her motor and flipped her swoop sideways to avoid being tracked. A second later, Hurana dipped below it, missing it by only a fraction. Anakin saw her grin and knew she had timed it that way. The others followed expertly.

Anakin was impressed. He increased his speed, timing his approach with the revolving camera lenses. He pulled the swoop up and then down quickly, missing the lens by a comfortable half second.

He pushed the engine to maximum and quickly caught up to the others. He didn’t slow down but zoomed by them. He saw Rolai’s surprised face, but Marit looked worried.

He saw why. Below him a group of professors had paused on the stairs outside one of the academic buildings, talking. Any moment they would see him.

He turned the swoop to the left and headed for the dense branches of an enormous tree. Behind him, he saw Marit pull her swoop up and circle out of range of the professors.

Anakin could hover in the branches, but he was too impatient. He dipped below one branch and zoomed up to skim above another. He snaked in and out of the thick branches, leaning his body first one way, then the other. He did not make even one

## Jude Watson

leaf tremble. The professors continued to talk, completely unaware of the swoop above them.

The others skirted the trees, looping around to avoid the professors and adding crucial minutes to their times.

He cleared the grove of trees out of sight of the professors, as well as Marit and her friends. A surveillance droid revolved ahead, surprising him for only an instant. Anakin pulled the swoop to a hard right, avoiding the rotating sensors. Then he dove beneath the droid and zoomed on.

Grinning, Anakin leaned over the handlebars and gunned the motor. He skirted a security camera and dove beneath a tractor beam. This was child's play for him.

The others were in sight again but still well behind him as he cleared a rooftop and did a quick triple loop dive to avoid being seen by a class of students playing laserball below. Then he dropped from the sky and landed in the same precise spot he had left from. He sat down and crossed his legs in a leisurely fashion.

A short two minutes later, Marit and the others pulled up. Anakin was surprised at their speed. They were almost as fast as a Jedi on a swoop. Marit swung off her swoop and strode toward him, tossing her braid behind her shoulder.

"Okay, hotshot," she said. "You win."

"What do I win?" Anakin asked. "If it's the chance to break out of here," he joked, "count me in." He spoke lightly, but he could feel how close he was to being accepted. He didn't need the Force to pick up on the humming energy among the group of friends. Something was definitely up. Had he found the secret squad the Jedi High Council spoke of?

"You see?" Marit said to Rolai. "I told you he could fly."

"He can fly," Rolai agreed.

"He's almost as good as me," Hurana said. Her pale gold eyes held a new respect.

"We have a sort of club," Marit said. "Not a school club. A serious club. Are you interested?"



## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

"I'm not sure yet," Anakin said. "Why don't you tell me about it?"

"We take on assignments from outsiders. Beings who need a little help. We use our skills to aid them. If my friends and I have one thing in common, we don't like to see others get kicked around. I think you're that way, too."

"I am," Anakin said. "What exactly do you do? Rescue fluffkits from trees?"

Rolai looked annoyed. "This isn't a joke. Two weeks ago on Tierell, we changed the course of a planet's history."

"And made a bundle of credits," Tulah said. "Don't forget that."

"We do whatever is needed," Marit said quickly. She gave Rolai a warning glance, as if he'd said too much. "You'll learn more if you join us. Look, I told you how it works here. They only run the scholarship program so that they'll look good. They don't care about us. They won't help us. No one will. We have to help ourselves. Why should we wait around to get passed over for good jobs when we can start our lives now?"

"I agree," Anakin said. "But how do you get off campus? You'd have to violate security."

Marit shook her head. "We're able to conduct the missions on our free days. We have permission to leave. We just have to be sure to be back in time. And there are ways to trick security." She grinned at Rolai. "Rolai is our security expert and financial officer. Ze handles communications."

Ze nodded. "Comlinks, datapads, holo transmissions. Traces and countertraces. There are plenty of frequencies to hide in, if you know how."

Anakin was impressed. Even he didn't know how to navigate the complicated process of concealing a transmission origin.

"I'm transportation," Hurana said. "I get us in and out, and fast."

Tulah lifted a finger. "I'm battle strategy. But mostly I'm comic relief."

## Jude Watson

Tulah spoke lightly, but something in his face told Anakin that his joking was a pose to hide a serious purpose.

“And I research the proposals,” Marit said. “I’m the galactic politics expert.”

“So what am I?” Anakin asked.

“We need someone who knows something about sophisticated air transport like starfighters,” Hurana said. “I know some, but Marit has been watching you, and she says you know more.”

“I don’t know about that,” Anakin said. “But I did grow up fixing engines. So how do you decide what you’re going to do?”

“We consider proposals and vote on them,” Hurana said. “Everyone’s vote is equal.”

“And every decision is unanimous,” Tulah said. “If one of us doesn’t want to take an assignment, we pass on it. You’d get an equal vote, too, fly-guy. Just try to vote with me.”

Unlike the others, Rolai’s look was cool. Anakin had the feeling that he would have to prove himself to the Bothan before he welcomed him. It didn’t bother him. He might feel that way himself with an outsider.

“The kind of assignments we take on are important,” Marit said. “We’re just starting, but already what we can do has spread to the right beings. We’re on the side of justice in the galaxy. The powerful exploit the weak. We try to tip the balance. In one of our last missions we broke into the records of a company that was dumping its toxic garbage on a neighboring planet’s moon. We exposed them and got paid for it. We can get away with a lot because adults tend not to notice kids. They underestimate us.”

Rolai grinned. “Big mistake.”

To his surprise, Anakin found himself liking what he was hearing. It was almost like being a Jedi, but without Masters. No one told the squad what to do. They picked their own missions and were responsible only to themselves.

“Count me in,” he said.

## Chapter Nine

Anakin met Ferus at their prearranged spot in the computer lab during their free time before lights out. Most of the students were in their own rooms, studying or talking. No one liked to venture out into the halls at night, no matter how good security was now. The computer lab was open but empty. They spoke in low voices in a corner.

“Reymet keeps dropping hints,” Ferus said without waiting for Anakin to speak. “He says he knows something about some secret goings-on at the school. He even has hinted that it has something to do with Gillam’s disappearance. I know he’s trying to impress me, but I still think he knows something. Maybe about the secret squad. If we could infiltrate it, we’d finally have something to tell Obi-Wan.”

“I *did* infiltrate it,” Anakin said.

Ferus looked startled. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You didn’t give me a chance,” Anakin said. As usual, Ferus got under his skin. “It just happened today.”

“How? Who is it? This is great news,” Ferus said approvingly.

Anakin wasn’t sure what annoyed him more—Ferus’s lack of envy at his progress, or the way his approval sounded just a bit condescending, as though Ferus was his Master.

## Jude Watson

"I was approached by Marit Dice," Anakin said. "She and her friends are all scholarship students here at the school. That's the key. They feel that they won't be treated fairly when it comes to positions after graduation, so they decided to strike out on their own. The school doesn't help them. They only help the sons and daughters of the important people."

"Sounds like an excuse to me," Ferus said.

"No," Anakin said, annoyed. "I'm sure it's true Haven't you noticed that the other students don't talk to the scholarship students?"

"Not really," Ferus said. "After all, I talk to Reymet."

"Only because you have to."

Ferus sighed. "So they picked you because you're a scholarship student."

"They picked me because they thought they could trust me," Anakin said. "I don't have a reputation as a snob."

If Ferus felt the sting of Anakin's remark, he didn't show it. "Did they say anything about Gillam? Do you know if he was in the squad?"

"They didn't say a word about Gillam," Anakin said.

"That's strange," Ferus said. "It's all everyone else at school talks about."

"They have more important things on their minds," Anakin said.

"Is Marit the leader?"

Anakin gave this some thought. "She did most of the talking. But I didn't get the feeling that she was the leader. They say they vote on everything."

"Do you know if they're going out on an assignment?" Ferus asked.

Anakin shook his head. "Not yet. I'll find out."

Ferus frowned. "So do you think there's a connection? And if there is, what could it be?"

"I don't know," Anakin said. "I can't imagine them kidnapping a fellow student. They seem straightforward. They

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

take on good causes. They're almost like Jedi, in a way. Think about it, Ferus. Can you imagine being able to pick and choose your own missions?"

Ferus looked at him curiously. "No. That's why we have the Council."

"But if we didn't, we could use our skills on missions that we decided were important."

"If we didn't have the Council, we wouldn't be Jedi." Ferus gave him the severe look that always got under his skin.

Anakin decided to change the subject. "Do you know anything about the planet Tierell?"

"There was a coup there. It was a repressive government. The leader was assassinated two weeks ago. The rebels are now in charge. Why?"

"The squad said they were involved," Anakin said.

"In an assassination? Do you call that a good cause?"

"I didn't say that they assassinated the leader," Anakin argued. "I just said they were involved."

"Anakin, they are mercenaries," Ferus said, exasperated. "What exactly do you think they do?"

"Not cold-blooded murder," Anakin said decidedly.

"You've made a lot of conclusions considering you just met them," Ferus said.

"It's an instinct," Anakin said. "That doesn't mean they can't be hiding something. I'm not totally in their confidence yet. I need to gain their trust."

Ferus nodded slowly. "I agree. But be careful."

Anakin said good-bye and was halfway down the hall before he wondered what exactly Ferus wanted him to be careful of.

The secret squad had a secret signal, of course. Many of the students had holographic displays outside their doors. When a hologram of a detailed topographical map of Marit's homeworld of Hali was outside her door, a meeting was scheduled. If the

## Jude Watson

moons of Hali were shown, the meeting was in the free evening hours. If the three suns were shown, the meeting would take place before the morning meal.

They met almost every day. Anakin was surprised at the number of proposals for help they received, from groups and individuals all over the galaxy. The squad had only been in operation for six months, and the word of mouth had spread. Rolai received the requests on a datapad Ze had tweaked so that the routing system was too complicated to trace. Credits were deposited in a secret account in an Andoran bank known for discretion. Anakin admired the group's professionalism. They discussed the proposals seriously, and he was impressed at Marit's knowledge of galactic politics and history. It was obvious that they needed a mission soon, for their treasury was low and they needed supplies.

Anakin was heading to his last class when he saw the signal for an evening meeting. As soon as the free period began, he headed for a storeroom located near the students' rooms. The storeroom wasn't used at such hours and they did not have to pass through security checkpoints to get to it from their rooms. It was a private place to meet.

He slipped inside the room to find the others waiting. He got the sense that they had been talking before he entered. "Do we have a proposal?" he asked, sitting down on the floor next to Hurana.

"No," Rolai said. "It's just a general meeting. Anybody have anything?"

"Just stuff we can't afford," Ze said. "I haven't wanted to bring this up, but we've got to upgrade our comlinks. We've got to get some holographic capabilities pretty soon. And if we don't up-tech the drivers, we'll be blasting static when we go past the Core. I have an idea how I can do a basic upgrade without dipping into the treasury, but it's going to be complicated." Ze launched into a highly technical discussion that obviously left the rest of the squad behind.

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

“So if I patch into the C-board here and steal some juice from the circuit, I can maybe extend the range from meta to mega if the systems don’t chatter and I don’t pulverize the school mainframe,” Ze concluded cheerfully.

“Affirmatively good work, Ze-tech.” Tulah nodded his head in approval, but it was obvious he hadn’t a clue as to what Ze was talking about. By the looks on the faces of the rest, they felt the same.

“Don’t forget to bypass the transit sensor when you patch,” Anakin said. “Otherwise you’ll end up with a cinder instead of a comlink.”

“An excellent point,” Ze said, impressed.

“I was going to say that transit thing,” Tulah said. “I mean, I would have if I’d known what Ze was talking about.”

Marit gave Anakin a sidelong look. “You know comm systems?”

“Some,” Anakin said. As a slave at Watto’s shop, he had learned how to fix anything. He had kept up the hobby as a Jedi student. “I know droid circuits better.”

“That’s good, because we might be in the market for an astromech,” Tulah said. “Love those little guys. Hurana has been shopping for a couple of used A-6 interceptors, and a couple of astromechs are key. By the way, we really need to get some starfighters soon. This hitching rides on freighters has got to stop.”

“I agree,” Rolai said. “They’re slow.”

“Right. But what I really meant was, the food is terrible,” Tulah said. “Bleh.”

“What’s the weapon capability of the interceptors?” Rolai asked Hurana.

“Turbolaser cannons, very sweet,” Hurana said. “Both ships are in good shape. The only problem is that one of them has a tendency to cut out during dives.”

“That could be a minor inconvenience,” Tulah said. “Remind me to fly in the other one.”

## Jude Watson

Everyone laughed, but Anakin noted how their intent looks never changed. He was impressed with their focus.

"I've gone on a couple of test flights and it's a pretty consistent problem," Hurana admitted. "Last time I came within twenty meters of complete annihilation on the planet surface before I was able to pull out."

"That sounds dangerous," Anakin said. The flow of conversation was fast and decisive. It told him better than words what a tightly knit team this was.

She flashed him a grin. "That's what made it fun."

"What about a hyperdrive?" Marit asked.

Hurana shook her head. "We might be able to add it. But that means major investment capital."

"Don't worry about that," Rolai said.

"Why not?" Marit said. "The treasury is completely zilched."

"I'm working on it," Rolai said. "Just draw up your wish lists, and I'll let you know what we can handle."

"Sounds like my speed," Tulah said. "Numbers are not my thing."

"I've got a wish list, too," Rolai said. "Speaking of upgrades, our weapons are sad. A couple of blasters aren't going to get us very far. We need some secondary weaponry. Some thermal detonators, a flechette launcher, maybe some missile tubes—"

"Hang on," Marit said. "We're not an army."

"Sure we are," Rolai said. "If we act like it, we'd better have the stuff to back it up. Things would have gone a lot better on Tierell if we'd had the firepower—"

"Or a lot worse," Marit shot back.

"Not this again," Rolai said, rolling his eyes. "Six blasters for six members is the bare minimum. If we'd had a flechette launcher—"

"You're right, Rolai," Marit said. "We've gone over this too many times. Let's just be glad the mission was a success. Now we'd better get back to our rooms."



## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

Anakin hung back as the others slipped out the door. He closed it behind them and turned to face Marit.

"We'd better get going," she said. "Lights out will be soon—"

"What was that about?" Anakin asked.

"What?" Marit said evasively.

"He said six blasters," Anakin said.

"What?"

"He said you had six blasters for six members. But there are only five."

"Six, counting you."

"But I wasn't on the mission to Tierell."

Marit shrugged. "Rolai meant now, not then. Six blasters for six members."

Anakin let it pass. "Tell me about Tierell."

Marit turned away. "I don't want to tell you about Tierell."

"Something's bothering you about it," Anakin said. "Maybe if you tell me, I can help."

"I don't need help," Marit snapped.

"Okay," Anakin said. "Then let's say I deserve to know. I'm putting my life on the line, too, you know."

Marit's brown eyes studied him. He knew the moment she decided to trust him. It only took a few seconds. He was beginning to see that Marit didn't like to waste time. "We had trouble. We'd been hired to slip into the Leader's Advisors' Chambers and dismantle security. The room was supposed to be empty, but the advisors were having a meeting. We had a battle with some security droids. The blaster fire was incredible. We could barely handle it. And...in the confusion, the leader of Tierell was killed."

"Who did it?" Anakin asked.

Marit hesitated. Then she took a deep breath. "I did."

Slowly, she sank back down to a crouching position on the floor. Her hands dangled between her knees. "I've gone over it and over it, and I still don't know why or how it happened. The success of the mission depended on it. The freedom of the

## Jude Watson

beings of Tierell depended on it. Maybe my friends' lives depended on it. Maybe mine. In other words..." Marit shrugged. "Everything depended on it. But I can't stop thinking..."

"That it could have gone another way." Anakin knew that feeling. He, too, had taken a life. More than one. He didn't like to think about it. Those experiences were locked in a place in his mind where he did not go.

He crouched down in front of her. "If everything depended on it, you did the right thing. If you can't make yourself believe that, you'll drive yourself crazy."

She looked into his face searchingly. "You seem to know how I feel."

"I do," Anakin said. He stood and held out his hand. She took it and he helped bring her to her feet.

"You see?" he said. "Everybody needs help sometime."

"I think she lied about the blasters, but I don't know why," Anakin told Obi-Wan in their next communication.

"Do you think Gillam was once part of the squad?"

"That doesn't make sense. He's not a scholarship student. But something is up, I can feel it. Something with Rolai isn't right. Maybe he knows something. He's in charge of security, and also the treasury. None of the others seem to care about how he handles it. Maybe...I don't know, maybe he decided to raise money by kidnapping Gillam and holding him for ransom, but he didn't tell the others."

"Maybe," Obi-Wan said doubtfully. He sounded distracted, as though he weren't really listening to Anakin. "But Tarturi hasn't received a ransom demand."

"Yet. I'm not sure what to think," Anakin confessed. "I can't imagine the group kidnapping Gillam. They're all pretty dedicated. Marit has an incredible grasp of galactic politics. She knows what's being debated in the Senate right down to the

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

subcommittee hearings. And she always comes in on the right side.”

“And how do you know it’s the right side?” Obi-Wan asked, his voice dry. “Because you agree with it?”

“Because they are against violence and oppression,” Anakin said. “They’re like the Jedi.”

“Yet they are operating against school rules,” Obi-Wan pointed out. “If you are willing to violate trust, you cannot claim virtue.”

“The school doesn’t deserve their trust. It let them down.”

“Nonetheless, they are attending the school and agreed to abide by its rules,” Obi-Wan said. “I can understand the attraction they have for you, Anakin, but I fear you are getting too involved. You must be a Jedi at all times. You must constantly strive for inner balance. This includes being swayed by the ideas of others. They often mask a different purpose.”

“What purpose could they mask?”

“That is your job to find out. Do not forget that you are trying to find a missing boy. Anakin, the fact that you are a Jedi is what will keep you steady always. That is something to hold on to. If you know your first loyalty, the rest falls into place. Do you understand?”

“I do, Master. Have you made progress in the Senate?”

Obi-Wan sighed. “Yes and no. Nothing to report yet. I’m sure there is a connection between Rana Halion and Sano Sauro, but I can’t find it.”

“Rana Halion?”

“Ruler of Ieria. The leader of the countermovement in that system. I think she might have something to do with Gillam’s disappearance. Keep me informed if you learn anything more, Padawan.”

“Yes, Master.” Anakin frowned as Obi-Wan cut the communication. His Master had not been very forthcoming with information. And he did not seem interested in the secret squad.

## Jude Watson

Anakin had the feeling that Obi-Wan didn't think they were involved in Gillam's disappearance.

But Anakin felt differently. And here, he could follow his own rules.

All his life, he had known only two ways to live: as a slave, or as a Jedi. As a young boy on Tatooine he had looked to the Jedi as the most free beings in the galaxy. Even before he knew much about them, he had dreamed of being a Jedi.

But was being a Jedi being free? Or had he traded one form of slavery for another?

The thought was so shocking that Anakin couldn't face it once he dredged it up. He tucked it away in the place in his mind that he did not visit. It was a place where fear ruled. He never went there, not even in the middle of the night when he woke, his head full of dreams, and did not know where he was or why his mother was not near.

Anakin put his comlink back into his tunic. For the first time since entering the school, returning to comm silence did not make him feel cut off. He was glad not to answer to anyone, even for twenty-four hours. He headed out to find Marit and the squad, where there were no Masters to chide him.

## Chapter Ten

Frustration boiled inside Obi-Wan. He could not trace a connection between Sano Sauro and Rana Halion. He was working on it; Tyro was working on it. The best researchers at the Temple were working on it, including Jocasta Nu, the Jedi Archivist. Though she usually demanded that Jedi Knights do their own research, she agreed to help Obi-Wan since the matter was so pressing. A young boy's life could be at stake. The image of Gillam still tore at Obi-Wan's heart—the way he'd clutched the blanket around his shoulders, the courage he tried to convey.

None of these experts had come up with anything. And Obi-Wan was plagued by the feeling that he was missing something. Something obvious.

He retreated to his private quarters to think. He felt more in need of a Master than Anakin. He wished someone could give him the direction he was looking for.

In his reports from the Leadership School, Anakin had sounded self-sufficient, completely in charge of the situation. Obi-Wan didn't know if the secret squad was involved in Gillam's disappearance, but he was proud of his Padawan for infiltrating it so quickly. He just wished he hadn't heard something in Anakin's voice that reminded him of his own past. When he had been a Padawan, he had briefly left the Jedi after

## Jude Watson

meeting a rebel group on Melida/Daan called The Young. To him, The Young had passion and commitment and an important cause. When Qui-Gon had forbidden him to stay and help them, he had turned his back on the Jedi. It had made complete sense to him then. He had felt so right—and he had been so wrong.

Inner balance. It took experience to know when the wrong instinct had made it careen off-kilter.

But Anakin was not the same. Being a Jedi meant everything to Anakin.

Obi-Wan returned to his more pressing problem. He stared down at the security report once again. What was he missing? He had a feeling that Qui-Gon would know. His Master was always able to combine emotion with logic to reach the correct conclusion. *Find the emotion behind the logic—or the illogic*, Qui-Gon would say. *If you can't see the solution, try to see the emotion*. But if something seemed logical to Obi-Wan, it was difficult to see the illogical heart of it.

He heard Qui-Gon's voice clearly in his head. *If something is not possible, then it did not happen*.

Obi-Wan stood up so suddenly that the report slid off his lap. Security wasn't breached. Gillam never left the academy campus!

He was still there. But was he alive...or dead? And who took him?

Ferus had reported that Reymet had hinted that he knew how to visit places he wasn't supposed to go within the school campus. What if Reymet wasn't just trying to impress Ferus? What if Reymet had seen something that night?

Obi-Wan shook his head. It didn't seem logical that Reymet would keep silent when the life of a fellow student was at stake. Reymet might be a sneak, but he had no reason to suppose he would support a kidnapper.

Obi-Wan had never attended a regular school, but the Temple was like one in many ways. He thought back to his own training. Why would Reymet keep silent?

The answer roared into his brain.

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

Because adults didn't take Gillam. Students did. A boy Reymet's age wouldn't turn in fellow students. What had Anakin told him students called someone who snitched?

If Reymet told, he'd be a womp fink.

His comlink signaled. Hoping it was Anakin, he snatched it and activated it.

He felt the thud of disappointment when he heard Jocasta Nu's voice. Unless Anakin contacted him on the emergency channel, he would have to wait until their next scheduled communication the following day.

"I have traced the payment for you, even though you were perfectly capable of doing so yourself, if you had paid attention to my instructions," Jocasta Nu's crisp voice said. "There was a credit payment from Rana Halion to an account on Andara. The account is anonymous, but through a series of traces I've discovered that it is used by that secret renegade squad the Council is so concerned about. A boy named Rolai Frac set it up. An impressive use of cloaking maneuvers hid his identity. I've rarely seen better."

"Thank you, Madame Nu," Obi-Wan said fervently.

"Next time, you will do your own research, Master Kenobi. I do not have time to indulge your many requests, and I—"

"Yes, Madame Nu," Obi-Wan said. "May the Force be with you. You may have just given me the key to find the boy."

"That's good, then. May the Force be with you," she answered, the disapproval fading from her voice.

It was the confirmation he needed. Anakin's hunch that the secret squad was involved was right after all. Gillam had been kidnapped by his fellow students on the secret squad. But they hadn't done it on their own—Rana Halion had arranged it. Whether Sano Sauro was involved, he might never know.

Obi-Wan hurried out of his quarters toward the vehicle requisition area. He felt as though he should kick himself down the hall. He had chastised Anakin about inner balance while he was losing his own! His need to investigate Sano Sauro had led

## **Jude Watson**

him to make assumptions and go off on a dangerous tack. He had wanted Sauro to be responsible, so he had tried to build a case around it.

He had been so wrong. He had lost sight of his goal: to find the missing boy. The answer wasn't at the Senate. It was on Andara.



## Chapter Eleven

Anakin left his room well before the call for the morning meal. There was no hologram on Marit's door. He hesitated, fighting his urge to knock. It was unusual for the squad not to meet again. There had been several things to resolve. And he'd had the feeling that Marit was avoiding him.

He left without knocking, however, and continued down the hall. Maybe Ferus had some new information. Anakin was beginning to get impatient. Days were passing, and they were no closer to finding Gillam.

He was almost at Ferus's door when he saw the door to the athletic storeroom slide open. Rolai stepped out.

Anakin quickly retreated back around the corner. He peered around the wall and saw Tulah, Hurana, and Ze hurrying out behind Rolai. They all disappeared around the corner.

Anakin strode forward and pushed open the door. Marit was just tucking her datapad under her arm. She looked at him, startled.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "I thought I was in the squad. Why am I being left out?"

"We don't know if we can completely trust you yet, Anakin," Marit said reluctantly.

## Jude Watson

"You've accepted a new mission, haven't you?" Anakin guessed.

Marit nodded, biting her lip.

Exasperated, Anakin turned on his heel. "Fine. I'm out."

"Anakin, wait!" Marit put her hand on his arm.

"It's Rolai, isn't it? He doesn't want me in the squad."

"No, Rolai is the one who wants you on the mission," Marit said. "It's just that I think it's dangerous, and it might not be the right way to start."

"Just tell me, and let me decide," Anakin said.

"It's a mission very close by," she said. "Right here in the Andaran system. You might not know this, but there's a countermovement here."

"I've heard something about it," Anakin said.

She gave him a keen look. "How do you stand on the issue?"

Anakin shrugged. "I don't know enough about it."

"Andara is the largest and richest planet in the system," Marit said. "As a result, it has grabbed the best trade routes and built up its manufacturing and exporting to the detriment of the other planets in the system. They aren't fairly represented by their Senator. They can't get what they need from the Senate because they don't have a voice."

"That doesn't seem fair," Anakin said.

"It's not. A representative of the countermovement came to us and asked for our help."

"Who?"

"You don't need to know that yet."

Anakin started for the door again.

"All right!" Marit's voice was amused, and she was smiling when he turned. "You're very tough."

He grinned. "Yeah. But isn't that why you recruited me?"

"It's Rana Halion, the leader of Ieria. She approached us through Rolai. The countermovement is willing to negotiate with Berm Tarturi, but the Senator hasn't taken them seriously enough. They want to show him how powerful they are."

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

Rana Halion! This could be the connection Obi-Wan was looking for.

“How?” Anakin asked.

“They want to conduct a passive strike on the Andaran security transport landing platform,” Marit said.

“Passive strike?”

“We’re just going to penetrate their airspace and then get out. Buzz the starfighters. Show Tarturi that we *could* have destroyed his fleet if we’d wanted to. That way he’d be forced to join negotiations. We need to get in and get out quickly. There could be some antispacecraft fire.” She hesitated.

Anakin waited.

“We were going to vote on whether to include you tonight,” Marit said.

Anakin said nothing. He had learned from Obi-Wan that not asking a question sometimes got you more information.

“We need a pilot,” Marit said. “Hurana is good, but she’s not as good as she thinks she is. She takes too many chances. We need a lead pilot. But this won’t be on a simulator. Ieria is loaning us the air transport. I don’t expect you’ve ever flown a starfighter, have you?”

“As a matter of fact, I have,” Anakin said.

“Are you as good in a starfighter as you are in a swoop?”

“Better.”

“I can talk to them...convince the others...if you’re sure you want to go.”

“I’m sure,” Anakin said. He wanted to go on the mission. If the planets in the Andaran system were being exploited, they should have a voice in their destiny. Marit’s ideas made sense to him. He had been a witness to the greed of Senators. It sounded as though Ieria needed help.

“Well, I’m not authorized to tell you that you can go,” Marit said. She grinned. “But you’re on board. We’re scheduled to leave tomorrow.”

## **Jude Watson**

Elation roared through Anakin. Then he realized something startling. He hadn't been glad because of the Jedi mission. He'd been glad because he wanted to go. Not for the Jedi. For himself.

## Chapter Twelve

Anakin was filled with excitement about the coming mission. He had a strong feeling that not only would he help the Andaran system, he would also discover the key to Gillam's disappearance. Rana Halion must be behind it. Her cause might be just, but her methods could be ruthless. Anakin felt sure that Gillam was on Ieria.

He saw Ferus in the hall between classes and signaled that he needed to talk to him. They met in Ferus's room and closed the door. They had a few minutes before the midday meal before they needed to pass the checkpoint to the dining hall.

Anakin quickly filled in Ferus on what had happened.

Ferus frowned. "You told Marit that you would go?"

"I think I should," Anakin said. "I still have a feeling about Gillam."

"That's fine," Ferus said. "But penetrating a planet's airspace? You can't do that."

"No one will be hurt."

"How can you be sure of that? Are you saying that no one will fire their laser cannons? Are you saying that if they fire on you or the others, you won't fire back? Think about it, Anakin! And what about the reaction in the Senate? This will be seen as an unprovoked attack on Andara."

## Jude Watson

“Not unprovoked,” Anakin argued. “Senator Tarturi refuses to negotiate a compromise. This will force him to.”

Ferus shook his head. “Jedi can’t take part in such things. Have you told Obi-Wan this?”

“No,” Anakin admitted. “Our next scheduled communication isn’t until tonight.”

“We can use the emergency signaling system,” Ferus said.

“But that could blow our cover! We’re on comm silence. The school could trace the frequency.”

“We have to risk it,” Ferus said. “I can’t believe that you even considered going without consulting him. Even *you* should know that—”

“Even *me*?” Anakin took a step toward Ferus, angry now. “What does that mean, Ferus?”

Ferus went very still. “A personal argument is not productive,” he said stiffly. “Will you meet me later and contact Obi-Wan?”

Anakin counted several beats of his tripping heart. He accepted his anger and tried to let it go. He pictured it leaving him like a black storm cloud blown by a high wind, but traces of it clung to him and he could not shake it off.

“Yes,” he said reluctantly.

He left and hurried toward the dining hall. He sat with Marit and Hurana. Hurana was quiet, but Marit was in high spirits. They did not talk about the mission ahead, but the secret lay between them, giving a charge to their conversation. He could see that Marit had accepted him fully into the squad. She trusted him now.

*But you’re going to betray that trust.*

Was he? He hoped not. But the time was coming when he would have to leave the school and the squad.

Anakin went to his next class so that he would not be missed and compromise the squad. Then he faked an illness and started toward the med clinic. Their emergency plan was for Ferus to also fake a reason to leave class. They were to meet in his room.

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

Ferus wasn't there. Anakin waited, watching the clock, knowing that he was pushing his luck. When Ferus didn't appear, Anakin hurried to his next class. He would see Ferus there, and he hoped to get a chance to ask him why he had insisted on a meeting he didn't show up for. Maybe he was busy polishing his utility belt.

Anakin took his usual seat. He glanced over, but Ferus's seat was empty. The professor began, but Anakin couldn't listen. Ferus's seat remained empty. Suddenly, Anakin was seriously worried.

After class, Anakin walked quickly through the halls. He searched the library, Ferus's room, and all the classrooms. He searched the athletic fields and the research centers and the computer labs. He casually asked Reymet if he'd seen him, but Reymet hadn't, either.

Ferus had disappeared.

Anakin could not believe it. Security had not been violated. No one had seen Ferus, not even Reymet. It was just like Gillam's disappearance. If Ferus hadn't shown up for class, it would have been reported. Soon the school would be involved. Security would tighten even further.

He would have to contact Obi-Wan. The disappearance of a Jedi was a matter for the whole Council, not merely his Master.

Still, Anakin hesitated. It was hard to be certain that Ferus had truly disappeared. What if he was chasing a lead and hadn't told Anakin? Anakin knew it would be out of character for Ferus not to fill him in, but Ferus might be teaching him a lesson after Anakin hadn't asked his opinion about going off with the squad.

Yet if Anakin violated comm silence, he risked the whole school being put into lockdown. How would the secret squad be able to get out then?

Marit found him in the library during his free mod period, still debating the issue in his mind.

"We've moved up the mission," she whispered. "We're leaving now. We all signed out for leave. If you're coming, you'd

## **Jude Watson**

better do it, too. I'll come with you. We made up a research trip to the library in Utare and got Professor Totem to sign a pass for us."

Anakin hesitated.

"Aren't you coming?" Marit asked. She frowned. "Did you change your mind? I know the mission sounds dangerous."

Anakin felt the conflict inside him as though he was being physically torn apart. He knew his duty as a Jedi. He had to inform Obi-Wan about Ferus. But if his suspicions were correct and the answers were on Ieria, that meant he could find out answers about Ferus's disappearance as well. If he broke comm silence he could jeopardize everything. His only chance to find Ferus and possibly Gillam was to maintain his cover.

"I didn't change my mind," Anakin said. "Let's go."



## Chapter Thirteen

Obi-Wan landed his starship on the main public landing platform in Utare. He completed his postflight check and activated the landing ramp. As he strode down it, he saw Siri waiting at the bottom. Her hands were on her hips and her blue eyes sparked fire.

He guessed that she did not have good news.

She spoke when he was still only halfway down the ramp. “How could you withhold this from me, Obi-Wan? Did you think you could solve it by yourself and I’d never have to know? Were you afraid of how I’d react?” She put one booted foot on the ramp as though she were ready to charge at him. “Well, you were right to be afraid!”

“Nice to see you, too, Siri,” Obi-Wan said, coming up to her. He had been friends with Siri for over ten years now, and she could still nettle him like no one else. He wondered what minor infraction he was guilty of. “Now, do you mind filling me in on what you’re talking about?”

“Ferus is missing!” she exclaimed. “Don’t tell me you didn’t know.”

Obi-Wan’s mild amusement faded immediately. “No, I didn’t.”

“Didn’t Anakin contact you?”

## Jude Watson

“Our next scheduled communication isn’t until tonight, and I received no emergency signal. Are you sure about this?”

“Ferus contacted me via the emergency channel. I was on a mission and couldn’t answer for an hour. When I tried to reach him, he didn’t answer.”

“He never sent me a signal,” Obi-Wan said.

“I think something happened before he could,” Siri said. “His message was cut off. But he did say that Anakin was taking off on a mission with the secret squad. They’re going to conduct an air strike on the Andaran security transport landing platform.”

Obi-Wan stopped short. “What?”

“You didn’t know?”

“Of course not.” Obi-Wan was staggered by this news. He couldn’t absorb it. A Jedi was missing, and Anakin had not informed him? Anakin had agreed to take part in an air strike against a nonhostile planet? It seemed inconceivable.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “Was Anakin captured, or forced to leave with the squad?”

“No,” Siri said. “It was his own free will. Ferus was clear about that. He sounded worried about Anakin.”

*Ferus was often worried about Anakin*, Obi-Wan thought. He had noted that already. Ferus was concerned that Anakin would let down the Order in some way.

And so he had. Obi-Wan felt the betrayal like a hard blow to his stomach. He had trouble getting air. He struggled with his own emotions, surprised at the depth of them. He felt betrayed, he realized. Why hadn’t Anakin trusted him?

He swallowed. “Did Ferus know where Anakin was headed?”

“To Ieria. That’s all. And it’s a big planet.”

He wished Siri would look away. Her eyes had not left his face. Her gaze scorched him.

He had promised to watch over Ferus like his own Padawan. He had failed.

He had lost both Padawans. It was unthinkable. Yet here he was.

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

He did not know what to do. Whatever step he took could be the wrong one. And if he took the wrong one, he could lose one of them. Or both.

Obi-Wan's thoughts whirled crazily. He could not focus.

"Let's decide how to proceed," Siri said crisply.

That was the way of the Jedi. Accept the mistake and move on. But Obi-Wan's mind was a blank.

"We need to get into the school," Siri said. "Ferus is still there. I feel it."

The confusion cleared, and Obi-Wan remembered why he had come to Andara.

"I think Gillam is there, too," he said. "But without Anakin and Ferus to help us, we can't infiltrate the campus without being detected. We can't come as Jedi. We can't take the chance that someone will be watching. We must appear as though we belong there."

"But how?" Siri asked. "Security there is incredibly tight. And we don't look like students."

"I have an idea," Obi-Wan said.

Siri gave him a searching look. "I can tell I'm not going to like it."

"You're going to hate it," Obi-Wan said.

"Your excellencies," the president of the school said graciously. "How kind of you to consider the Leadership School for your son."

Obi-Wan and Siri walked into the inner office. It had taken only minutes to contact Tyro for some fast false text docs.

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice," Obi-Wan said.

"The king and queen of Cortella are always welcome," the president said. "Now, how old is your son?"

"Thirteen," Obi-Wan said.

"Eleven," Siri said at the same time.

## Jude Watson

They looked at each other.

“Two sons,” Obi-Wan said quickly. “We have two. One for each of us,” he added heartily.

“I see. And you wish to enroll both?”

“No,” Siri said.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said at the same time.

“Remember, we talked about this, uh, dear?” Siri said, her eyes flashing a warning at Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan tried not to smile. He couldn’t help enjoying how much Siri was hating this.

“Of course. But you agreed with me, as you always do,” he said.

Siri’s gaze flashed sparks at Obi-Wan, but the president could not see. Siri inclined her head haughtily. She hadn’t done much to change her appearance, merely slicked back her hair more severely, but she looked suddenly regal to Obi-Wan.

“Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the princes will both attend,” she said in a distant tone. “We must be assured, of course, that the school is up to the highest standard.”

“It must be suitable for our royal regal sons,” Obi-Wan said. Siri shot him a look that said, *Let me handle this*.

“Of course,” the president said nervously. “Shall we get started on our tour?”

Obi-Wan and Siri stood. “We would prefer to tour on our own,” Obi-Wan said.

“We feel we will absorb the spirit of the place in that manner,” Siri said. She indicated their traveler’s tunics. “We dressed this way precisely so that we would not be conspicuous. We will not disturb your students.”

“Uh, ah...this is not exactly customary...” the president stammered.

“Nevertheless, it is our wish,” Obi-Wan said in a tone that implied that he was not used to being overruled.

“If there is a problem, we will go elsewhere,” Siri said. “There is an excellent school on Alderaan—”

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

“No, no, no problem,” the president said. He waved a hand. “You are free to explore. I will alert security that you are not to be disturbed.”

Siri tilted her head again. Obi-Wan nodded. They swept out the door.

“If you ever get tired of being a Jedi, you’d make an amazing queen,” Obi-Wan told Siri as soon as the door had slid shut behind them.

“And you’d make a terrible king,” she said. “Royal regal sons?”

“I was trying to sound pompous,” Obi-Wan said.

“Do you really think you need to try?” Siri asked. Her clear blue eyes held a mischievous glint. In the middle of any crisis, Siri was always able to joke. It never failed to take him by surprise. Now he realized with a sense of relief that her teasing was designed to tell him that she did not hold him responsible for the disappearance of Ferus. He was grateful to his old friend. He knew her so well. She would not speak of her feelings, but she would always manage to let him know what they were.

“Did you notice that the president seemed nervous?” Obi-Wan asked. “And it wasn’t just because he was meeting with a king and queen. The school must know Ferus is missing.”

“And they want to keep it quiet,” Siri said, nodding. “That’s why they haven’t put the school in lockdown. If it’s discovered that there are two missing students, they could lose students...and revenue.”

“Exactly. But the school must be looking for Ferus, too. They’ll search the obvious places.”

“So we have to get to the un-obvious ones,” Siri said. “Where should we start?”

“I think we should try to find Reymet Autem,” Obi-Wan said. “Ferus said several times that Reymet hinted at knowing something about Gillam’s disappearance. And he also said he knew how to get around security. Ferus never found out if he really did, but...”

## Jude Watson

“He’s our only lead,” Siri finished.

They started down the halls. Most of the students were in class. The president must have alerted security, for they were waved through all checkpoints.

But with the halls empty, they would have no luck finding Reymet. “We’re not getting anywhere,” Siri said, frustrated. “Maybe we need to go to registration. We can think of something in order to gain access to the class schedules—”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Obi-Wan said. “You’re forgetting the best thing about classes.”

“What’s that?”

A soft beeping signal came over the hidden speakers.

“They end,” Obi-Wan said.

Just then a voice was broadcast, speaking in a quiet but insistent tone. “End of mod six class. Five minutes to mod seven. Five minutes.”

Suddenly the doors hissed open and students spilled out into the hall. Obi-Wan and Siri were pushed against the walls as students ran, jostled, tossed datapads at one another playfully, or wolfed down a quick snack as they walked. Yet both Jedi could feel the effort and bravado in the calls and laughter. These students were afraid.

Obi-Wan hailed a student who appeared to be about Anakin and Ferus’s age. “Excuse me. Do you know Reymet Autem?”

The tall Phlog nodded. “He’s in my Current Galactic Political Trends class.”

“Can you find him for us?” Siri asked.

“Not a problem. He’s right there.” The Phlog pointed to a boy across the hall who was tossing a small datapad from one hand to the other as he walked.

“Thanks.” It was a lucky break. Obi-Wan and Siri headed toward Reymet.

“Are you a friend of Ferus Olin?” Siri asked him.

Reymet nodded proudly. “We’re best friends.” He eyed them carefully. “Hey, are you his parents? You look like you could be.”

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

“Yes, we’re his parents,” Siri said. “Have you seen him this afternoon?”

“No, and that’s weird, because he’s in three of my classes,” Reymet said. “Is he sick?”

“No, Reymet,” Obi-Wan said. “That’s why we came to you. We think Ferus is missing. We think it has something to do with what happened to Gillam Tarturi.”

“Will you help us?” Siri asked. “Ferus told us that you know secret things about the school.”

“I know some things,” Reymet said cautiously.

“We promise we won’t tell the school officials anything you show us,” Siri said.

Reymet still hesitated. “Unless you don’t tell us anything, and then we’d be forced to go to the school officials,” Obi-Wan pointed out.

“Whoa,” Reymet said. “In that case, I’d be happy to tell you everything I know.”

Obi-Wan noted that he sounded relieved. Maybe Reymet had a secret that had been a burden to keep, and that was why he kept hinting to Ferus that he knew something. “Follow me.”

The halls were emptying of students as Reymet quickly led them down to the ground level of the school.

“Class beginning. Mod seven.” The soft voice floated out from the speakers. “Mod seven. Class beginning.”

The hallway was empty. “Hurry,” Reymet hissed. “I only have a few minutes before I have to check in to my next class.”

He ducked into a storage closet, and Obi-Wan and Siri quickly followed. They crowded in next to him.

“Couldn’t you find a bigger place for us to hide?” Obi-Wan asked as he bumped into a durasteel toolbox.

“If you could just squeeze together, I can...” Reymet began to wiggle past them, then ducked down below them. “...okay, just a second...move your foot...no, the other way...thanks...”

Reymet unscrewed a panel from the wall. A large utility shaft opened up.

## Jude Watson

“In there,” he said.

“What’s in there?” Obi-Wan asked, peering in.

“When they renovated, they just built around all the old electrical and water systems,” Reymet explained. “It was cheaper than ripping them out. There’s a whole network of utility pipes still in place. They lead to the old system rooms.”

“Did you show Ferus this?” Siri asked.

Reymet nodded. “We were going to explore it together, during free time. I didn’t know he was missing. I would have looked for him—”

“Do you think he’s with Gillam?” Obi-Wan asked. He kept his gaze on Reymet.

Whatever reserve the young boy had crumbled. “I don’t know,” he said. “I think Gillam is still here, though. I saw him the night he disappeared. He knew about the old utility pipes, too.”

“Do you think Gillam is hiding?” Siri asked.

Reymet nodded. “I don’t blame him. With a father like that, I’d hide, too. That’s why I wouldn’t tell on him.” He looked uneasily at them. “But now I’m not so sure. I can see Gillam hiding, but I can’t see Ferus doing that. He isn’t mean like Gillam.”

“Gillam is mean?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have said that,” Reymet said. “He’s not mean, I guess. He’s just...not nice.” He shifted from one foot to the other uneasily. It was clear he was worried he’d said too much. “They’re doing extra security checks—and I’m late for class. One more demerit and I’m suspended. Not that having to leave this place would break my heart. But it just might break my old man.”

“Go,” Obi-Wan told him. “We’ll handle it from here.”

Reymet suddenly looked lost. “I really hope you find him. I like him a lot.” Reymet hurried out the door.



## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

Obi-Wan peered into the pipe. He could see where the dust had been disturbed, but it was impossible to tell by whom or by how many.

“After you,” Siri said.

Obi-Wan climbed into the pipe. He had to stoop and move slowly because of his size. Siri had an easier time.

“Hurry,” she urged him.

“Would you like to go first?”

“If I could get around you, I would.”

Obi-Wan saw light at the end of the pipe and quickened his pace. He slid out of the pipe onto a springy floor. He realized that it was covered in moss. The large space had a damp, moldy smell. Mildew marked the walls in cloudy patterns. The smell was close and dank.

“This must have been some sort of holding tank,” Siri said. She took out a glow rod and held it up. “Makes sense if that was a water pipe.”

Obi-Wan felt the floor suck at his boots. “There’s a couple of passageways. Any ideas?” He turned to Siri, but he already felt the Force move in the space. She was looking keenly about her, sending out the Force, trying to reach her Padawan. Obi-Wan joined her, calling on the Force to help them locate Ferus.

They turned at the same moment and headed for the passageway to their left. They could feel it now. The Force had entered the dank, dark space, and they knew Ferus was near.

Siri held her glow rod aloft. “I think we’re in the old water treatment system. See the inflow pipes?”

“These are holding pens for the water,” Obi-Wan said, peering into the rooms as they passed. Some of the chambers still had their durasteel panel doors. Others had doors that were half rusted away, or had been removed.

The Force grew stronger. Ahead they saw a chamber with an intact door. It was bolted to the wall with a new lock.

Siri withdrew her lightsaber. Within seconds, the metal peeled back, giving them an entry to the chamber.

## Jude Watson

Ferus sat in the middle of the room. He quickly stood, facing them. "I am sorry for needing rescue, Master," he said to Siri. "I am sorry, Master Kenobi."

"We all need rescue sometime," Obi-Wan said.

"Some more than others," Siri said, grinning at Obi-Wan.

Ferus was so different from Anakin, Obi-Wan thought. Anakin would have smiled at him as soon as he entered. *It's about time*, he would have said. Or maybe, *I hope you brought my lunch*. He felt an intense need to find his own Padawan. Added to the feeling was the fury that he was gone at all.

"What happened?" Siri asked Ferus. "Are you all right? Where is your lightsaber?"

"It's hidden in my room." Ferus made a face. "One of several of my mistakes. I came down here looking for Gillam without stopping there first. I thought if I found him I could prevent Anakin taking off with the secret squad. Instead, Gillam found me."

"Gillam?" Obi-Wan asked, surprised.

Ferus nodded. "He was never kidnapped. He staged it himself."

Obi-Wan felt a surge of impatience. He should have examined this possibility. He hadn't been able to imagine a son doing such a thing to his father. No matter how much he'd seen in his life, no matter what evil he'd faced, he was still capable of surprise at a son's resentment of a powerful father. It always surprised him, how personal a betrayal could be.

"I don't understand how he could have imprisoned you," Siri said with a frown.

"I was exploring, and I found a hiding place," Ferus said. "It's just down this corridor. His datapad was hidden in a drain behind a lock, in a plastoid sleeve. I was just trying to access it when I heard someone coming. It was Gillam and a few members of the secret squad. I was able to conceal the datapad but they got my comlink."

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

“What did they do?” Obi-Wan asked. He felt dread invade him. So the secret squad was involved.

“They thought I was just a nosy student,” Ferus said. “I decided not to resist because I didn’t want to blow my cover, or especially Anakin’s. They didn’t know what to do with me. They were afraid I’d report them. They searched me, but I used the Force to redirect them, so I was able to hang onto Gillam’s datapad. Then they put me in here. Gillam brought me food, but I haven’t seen him in hours.”

Ferus held up the datapad. “They left me alone, so I was able to read this. First of all, look—it has a Senate seal.”

Obi-Wan took it. He recognized the symbol of Andara on the back. “This belongs to Berm Tarturi.” He thought a moment. “Maybe Tarturi was right. Someone *did* break into his office and go through his things. But it was his own son.”

Ferus nodded. “That’s not all. There are ransom notes on this pad. Two of them have been sent. I think Gillam plans to pin his own kidnapping on his father.”

“Why would he do such a thing?” Siri asked. “Does he hate him so much?”

“He must,” Ferus said. “But that’s not the only thing. Are you in contact with Anakin?”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “He hasn’t reported in. He must be traveling or even on *leria* by now, but his comlink has been turned off.”

Ferus looked grave. “The last letter in the file takes responsibility for Gillam’s death. It hasn’t been sent yet, but it’s timed to go out in five hours.”

“He’s going to frame his father for his own murder?” Obi-Wan said.

“But how?” Siri asked. “He’ll need a body. There will be some kind of investigation.”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking about,” Ferus said quietly. He ran his hands through his hair in a rare gesture of agitation. “What if Gillam planned to produce a body? Someone similar in

## **Jude Watson**

age and build, someone who looks a little like him. They could plant text docs on the body, or near it.”

“They’d have to count on a great deal of chaos and confusion,” Siri said. “There are many tests that can be done to determine identity.”

“The secret squad is going to help start a war between Andara and the rest of the planets in the system,” Obi-Wan said. “They may not realize it, but they will. That will certainly create chaos.” He suddenly realized what Ferus, brooding in this damp cell, had already put together. “They just need a body.” He thought back to the information he had on Gillam, to the boy’s height and weight and coloring. “And they’ve chosen—”

“Anakin,” Ferus said.

## Chapter Fourteen

“If this doesn’t work, I don’t know you,” Rana Halion said. Her spiky white hair seemed to bristle like fur as she surveyed the secret squad.

Marit nodded. “Understood.”

“But it had better work,” Rana Halion added.

“It will,” Rolai said.

Rana Halion’s transparent blue eyes swept the group. She sighed. “If you didn’t come so highly recommended, I wouldn’t believe it,” she murmured. “You look like a bunch of kids.”

Anakin had to agree. Rolai was skinny and pale beneath his Bothan mane. Ze was plump. Tulah always looked as though he had just woken from a nap, and Hurana appeared slight and shy.

But he had seen that Rolai was tough, almost ruthless, Ze could dissect and solve any technical problem in five minutes or less, Tulah had a brilliant mind for strategy, and Hurana had convictions and no fear. Marit was smart and resourceful. He would put his own trust in this squad.

Rana pushed a contact button on her gold cuff and watched as a digital coded message flashed at her.

“I don’t have much time. Who is your lead pilot?”

Anakin stepped forward. “I am.”

## Jude Watson

Rana looked at him intently. Anakin thought it could have been the most intimidating glance he'd ever experienced—if he hadn't grown up at the Temple. Once you've faced Jedi like Mace Windu, no one else could intimidate you. He did not drop his own gaze and met hers without flinching.

She gave a short nod. "You seem competent. Can you pilot a starfighter?"

"I can fly anything."

"I almost believe it," she murmured, giving him another glance. "Do you know how to fire laser cannons at a target?"

Anakin glanced at Marit. "I thought there was to be no active firing."

Rana looked exasperated. "Who's in charge here?"

"We all are," Rolai broke in crisply. "And we all know how to fire laser cannons. We've been over this."

"Have you thoroughly briefed the squad?" Rana asked, raising an eyebrow skeptically.

"Not with the final details," Rolai said smoothly. "We were waiting for the exact time of departure and target details."

Rana glanced at her cuff again. "Do it then. You can inspect the starfighters. You leave in thirty minutes."

Marit exploded as soon as Rana was out of the room. "What was that all about? What do you mean, you haven't briefed the squad? What do you know that we don't know? We're supposed to vote on everything!"

"Calm down," Rolai said with a glance at the door to make sure Rana was out of earshot.

"Don't tell me to calm down," Marit answered hotly. "Tell me the truth!"

"The mission just changed a bit," Rolai said. "We're supposed to fire on the fleet."

"Fire on the fleet?" Anakin asked. "But that's a declaration of war!"

"That's not our problem," Rolai said. "We're hired to do the job. That's all."

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

“Wait,” Marit said. “Why didn’t you tell us this?” She looked at Ze, Hurana, and Tulah. Their gazes slid away. “You all knew, and I didn’t?”

“I didn’t know, either,” Anakin pointed out.

But no one was paying attention to Anakin. “We all voted to wait to tell you until we got here,” Hurana said. She didn’t meet Marit’s hot gaze.

“We thought you might object,” Rolai said. “After the last mission, you had some misgivings about organic damage.”

“Organic damage?” Marit said in disbelief. “Is that what you’re calling it now? They were living beings!”

“Marit, what do you think we’re doing?” Rolai asked. “This isn’t school. It isn’t a game. We all agreed we would start this as a business and run it as a business. We all agreed that we would make our own destinies.”

“That’s the point,” Marit said angrily. “We *all* agreed. We didn’t leave someone out.”

“I get your point, Marit,” Rolai said. “Now let’s move on. Here we are. Are you going to join us, or not?”

Anakin watched Marit’s face. He could see that she was torn. No one cared what he thought, but he would throw his support behind Marit if she voted to back out.

“I’m in,” she said in a low tone.

The group looked relieved. Even Rolai did, although he tried to hide it.

“Hold on,” Anakin said. “What about me? I’m part of the squad. Don’t I get a vote, too?”

Rolai gave him a glance that was so neutral Anakin felt a chill. It was as though Anakin wasn’t even there.

“We don’t have time for this,” Rolai said. “Let’s inspect the starfighters.”

Rana Halion suddenly appeared again. “We have a slight change in the timing of the attack. We need to go over the coordinates and warning systems now. You’ll have to come to the briefing room.”

## Jude Watson

Rolai gestured to the group. "Let's go."

"While you're doing that, I'll check out the starfighters," Anakin said. "I need to look at the controls and see if I can handle them."

Rolai gave him a glance. "I thought you said you could fly anything," he hissed so that Rana could not hear.

Anakin shrugged. "I sure *hope* I can," he murmured. "I don't tell you everything. But then again, you don't tell me everything, either. Do you?"

Rolai shot him a murderous look. "We're coming," he called to Halion. "You," he whispered angrily to Anakin, "check out those starfighters. You're going to have to give the rest of us some quick lessons."

Anakin waited until the group had left with Rana. Then he hurried to the hangar. There wasn't much time. He didn't have a choice now. He couldn't let the mission go through. He had to disable those starfighters. He knew that now. He was nowhere near discovering what happened to Ferus or Gillam, and he was about to start a war. He was probably breaking every Jedi rule in the archives.

The Ierian starfighters were modifications of the Delta-6 *Aethersprite* that he was used to. Anakin knew every bolt on the engine. He thought for a minute. He needed to disable something that would show up as a warning light midflight but wouldn't put the ship in danger. He wanted to give the pilots plenty of time to turn around and land. It would have to be something that would immediately lead them to abort the mission.

The laser cannon capacitors. Anakin swung open the maintenance panel. Small tools were snapped onto the panel within easy reach. He selected a small servo-driver and within minutes had disabled the capacitors.

He started toward the next ship, wondering if he should alter the engine cooling system just enough to cause the engines to



## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

overheat slightly. That might add a little urgency to the decision to abort the mission...

"What are you doing?"

Marit's voice echoed across the hangar. Anakin paused and peered around the control panel.

"Just a little tweaking."

She walked forward and peered into the system controls. "Do you think I'm stupid, Anakin? You've neutralized the laser cannon capacitors. I've studied the blueprints of this engine. I came back to see if you needed help. I guess you don't, do you?" She turned and looked at him. Their faces were very close. He could see the speculation and the disappointment in her eyes. "Why?"

"You don't think we should go on this mission, either," Anakin said.

"I voted to go." Marit's voice was firm. "The group rules."

"But I'm part of the group! The rule is that all decisions must be unanimous. Why isn't Rolai letting me vote?"

Marit shifted from one foot to the other. "He says new members shouldn't have full voting privileges until they've completed a mission—"

"And did you vote on that, or did Rolai just tell you?"

Marit's silence told him what he needed to know.

"So I'm supposed to risk my life without having a say in what we do? Do you think that's fair?"

"Do you think it's fair to sabotage our engines to get what you want?" Marit's voice rose challengingly. "How could you do this? I trusted you! I brought you into the group!"

Marit's brown eyes held anger and reproach. Anakin felt it was time for the truth. He owed her that.

"I'm a Jedi," he said. "I'm not really a student at the Leadership School. I was sent there to investigate Gillam Tarturi's disappearance."

"Gillam?" Marit was surprised.

## Jude Watson

“Don’t you want to know what happened to him?” Anakin asked. “And before we left, Ferus Olin disappeared. What if Rolai had something to do with it? What if he’s funding the squad with ransom money? He’s the one in charge of your treasury, and he’s the security expert. He’s the one with the connection to Rana Halion. What if she got him to kidnap Gillam? All the pieces fit. Why did he lie to you about this mission? Don’t you want to get to the bottom of it?”

Marit looked sad. “I wish you’d told me.”

“I’m telling you now.”

“You don’t understand anything. Gillam—” Marit hesitated.

“So tell me,” Anakin said, exasperated. “What about Gillam?”

“What about Gillam?” A mocking voice suddenly came from behind him.

Anakin whirled around. Gillam Tarturi stood, leaning against the wing of a starfighter. He was the same height as Anakin, and their eyes met across the space. Anakin felt shock and dismay ripple through him.

Anakin looked back at Marit. She nodded slowly.

“Gillam *is* the squad,” she said. “It was his idea. He formed it. He made up the bylaws. He recruited us. We wouldn’t have done anything without him. We would have been a bunch of miserable outcasts.”

“You faked your disappearance,” Anakin said to Gillam. “Why?”

“I have my reasons,” Gillam replied lightly.

Marit spoke into her comlink. “We need you,” she said crisply.

“What’s going on?” Anakin asked.

For his answer, he heard the soft sound of her blaster leaving its holster. He could have stopped her easily, but he didn’t. Marit pointed the blaster at him, a reluctant look on her face. Within seconds, the rest of the squad rushed into the hangar. Their blasters were drawn. They were all pointed at Anakin.

“I’m sorry,” Marit said.

## Chapter Fifteen

Marit's gaze was sorrowful. Rolai and Gillam looked hardened with purpose. But the others—Hurana, Tulah, and Ze—looked afraid. Why were they afraid? Anakin sensed that there was a conspiracy here. Gillam and Rolai were together, and they had roped in the rest of the reluctant squad. Except for Marit.

*There is something going on here that even Marit doesn't know.*

"He disabled the laser cannons on two of the starfighters," Marit told the others. "It's all right—I know how to fix it." She turned to Anakin. "We're going to have to restrain you until we're safely away."

Anakin looked at Gillam. "Is that so, Gillam? Why don't you tell her what you really have in mind?"

"Sorry, Marit," Gillam said easily. "That's not quite the plan."

"What's the plan, Gillam?" Anakin asked.

Marit gave Gillam a questioning look.

"How would the kidnapping disgrace Senator Tarturi if he wasn't implicated in something terrible?" Gillam said to Marit.

"And we get a very large bonus from Rana Halion, too," Rolai said.

"Think about what it will do for the countermovement, Marit," Gillam said. "The Senator kidnaps his own son to throw

## Jude Watson

suspicion on the Ierians. And then something goes wrong, and his son dies—”

“And it’s his fault,” Rolai chortled. “He sacrificed his own son so he could keep his power!”

“I don’t get it,” Marit said.

“I do,” Anakin said. “They want to kill me.”

Shocked, Marit looked from Gillam to Rolai. “That can’t be true.”

“Actually, we were going to hand you over to Rana Halion for that particular step,” Gillam said. “But as long as you pushed the issue...” He flourished his blaster and smiled at Anakin.

“But you’re not Gillam—they’ll figure that out,” Marit said.

“They have a plan to disguise the body somehow,” Anakin said. “I’m sure Rana Halion can find ways. I’ll be taken for Gillam. And Senator Tarturi will not only be disgraced among his own people, he’ll have a war on his hands. He won’t be able to investigate, even if he wants to.”

“Which he won’t, because he won’t care,” Gillam said. “He’ll just care about his Senatorial privileges being threatened.”

“It’s a brilliant plan,” Rolai said.

Marit stared at the two of them. “You’re both insane.”

Gillam shook his head sadly. “Poor Marit. You lost your nerve on Tierell. That’s why we couldn’t trust you.”

Marit looked at Tulah, Hurana, and Ze. “Are you going along with this?”

The three of them looked uncomfortable.

“Gillam says we must be warriors,” Hurana said. “This is the only way.”

“I just do the tech stuff,” Ze said.

“This has nothing to do with me,” Tulah said.

“Ah, one thing I should point out,” Gillam said. “Because of the disappearance of another student, the school has gone into security code green. And that means that all passes have been cancelled. You’ve missed three of the hour check-ins.”

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

"I knew I should have extended the range on our comlinks," Ze muttered.

"Which means we've been expelled," Hurana said.

"Which means, dear friends, that we have nowhere to go," Gillam said. "It's a big galaxy out there. We only have one another. And that's a *good* thing. Together, we can be the best. We can have everything we want, if we just stick together. At first we did it because nobody wanted us. But now we can do it because we're the best. We belong together."

Gillam's voice was low and compelling. Anakin saw the charisma and charm that had led these students to join him.

"Maybe nobody wanted the others," Anakin said. "Or you convinced them that it was true. I don't know about that. But what about you? You're the son of a powerful Senator. Who didn't want you?"

Gillam's face went white with sudden rage, and for the first time, Anakin could see that he was quite capable of killing him. "My father!" he shouted. Gillam regained control of himself with an effort. "And now he'll realize how wrong he was. Everyone will realize who underestimated my resolve. Well, Marit? Are you with us?"

Marit turned to Anakin. "I have nowhere else to go," she said.

"Marit, we're not doing anything wrong," Gillam said. "We're doing what we set out to do. We knew what the stakes were."

Anakin held Marit's gaze. "Did you know the stakes would be murder?"

"No one is asking you," Gillam snapped at Anakin. "You're already dead."

"He's a Jedi," Marit said. "If you think your plan will be easy, think again."

Gillam shrugged, coming closer to Anakin. "He has six blasters pointed at him. Even if you don't fire, I don't think we'll have a problem. I know the Jedi. I've seen them around the Senate all my life. They are basically servants of the Senators. Whatever power they had is gone now."

## Jude Watson

Anger coursed through Anakin. He saw the privilege Gillam had been brought up with, and how it had corrupted him. He saw that Gillam had counted on the feelings of the others, how they had felt lost and alone in a world he knew and they didn't. He had taken their minds and hearts and fashioned them into a weapon aimed at his father. The squad wasn't about justice. It was about revenge.

Anakin jumped up and kicked out with one foot in a spinning arc, booting the blaster from Gillam's hand while he held out a hand and, using the Force, tore Rolai's blaster from his grip. He landed on one leg and used the other to disarm Tulah with another well-aimed kick, grabbing the blaster from Ze's hand at the same time. He used his knee to dislodge the weapon from a surprised Hurana and then simply took Marit's from her hand. The entire series of attack moves took only seconds. The squad barely had time to blink.

Now they stared at him, or down at their empty hands. There was a beat, a moment of silence and surprise. Anakin pulled out and ignited his lightsaber, holding it in a posture any Jedi would recognize as offensive. He was ready to strike. He did not want to hurt anyone. That was his first concern. But he had to stop the squad's mission.

"Just don't move," he told them.

Anakin sensed movement behind him and turned slightly. Rana Halion had taken a step inside the hangar. As soon as she saw the lightsaber, she hit a button on her cuff.

Gillam smiled. "Looks like your luck has run out, Jedi."

"Jedi don't need luck," Anakin said, just as the attack droids swarmed into the hangar.

Blaster fire erupted from the droids, aimed at Anakin but scattered enough so that he feared for Marit and the others. The squad dropped, scrambling for their blasters. Anakin saw at once his problems. Gillam and Rolai had found blasters and were trying to aim at him as he moved. Fire from the droids was

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

heavy. Marit had ducked behind a starfighter. He did not think he could count on help from her. She seemed dazed.

He saw the smile of triumph on Gillam's face as he retrieved and aimed his blaster, and Anakin's anger returned. He reached out to the Force. He remembered the lessons he had learned from Soara Antana, the great Jedi Master. *The Force comes from stillness*, she had said. *Find your still center, even in the midst of battle.*

He saw time unspool before him like a ribbon. He saw it freeze like ice on a river. He saw that he had infinite time to do everything he needed.

With an outstretched hand he knocked the blaster from Gillam's grasp and sent it flying across the full space of the hangar. It hit the wall so hard it shattered. Gillam's smile disappeared.

At the same time he was moving, diverting the droids' blaster fire from where Tulah and Hurana had taken cover, pushing Ze behind a durasteel container, and knocking out one attack droid with a thrust to its control panel.

Suddenly the laser cannons from the starfighter on his right began to fire. Gillam had slipped inside the cockpit.

Anakin did not lose his sense of frozen time. He was the master of time. He did not worry about the laser cannons any more than he'd worried about the attack droids. It all seemed so easy. He seemed to see the fire before it came, and he knew how to move to avoid it. His movements were like shimmersilk, so fluid it was as though he did not have muscles and bones, only will.

Now his Master was here. He could feel that, too. But he did not need him.

He spun in midair, taking out two battle droids while he leaped through the laser cannonfire straight at the cockpit of the starfighter. With one backward slash he took out the final droid. He had a flash of Gillam's shocked face as he cut through the windscreen with one slice. With one hand, he threw Gillam out

## **Jude Watson**

of the pilot's seat and then dropped into it. He turned off the engines and disabled the laser cannons.

Siri and Ferus stood, lightsabers drawn, guarding Rolai, Marit, Hurana, Tulah, and Ze. Obi-Wan had captured Rana Halion.

Across the space, he looked at his Master. He waited for Obi-Wan to acknowledge him. The mission was over. He had been successful. He had found Gillam and thwarted an invasion.

He waited, standing in the cockpit, looking down. He could feel the flush of triumph on his cheeks. Siri glanced at him, as did Ferus. He could see the astonishment on their faces. But his Master never looked up.



## Chapter Sixteen

Never had Obi-Wan seen such a display of the Force from a Padawan. From the great Jedi Masters, yes. From Qui-Gon, near the end of his life. But from someone so young? Anakin's power astonished him. He had glimpsed it before, but now he had seen it unfurl, and it staggered him.

He had not had a chance to move, to help. Anakin had been a blur. He had seemed to be everywhere at once. He had destroyed ten attack droids, disarmed his aggressors, and disabled two laser cannons without hesitation, with even a slight smile on his face.

He could see that Siri and Ferus had been just as astonished at Anakin's deep connection to the Force, the way he had seemed to know what was going to happen before it happened, the way he was able to dodge fire before it occurred. Astonished, yes—and disturbed.

Unease settled into Obi-Wan's bones, joining his disappointment and the anger he had tried to eliminate from his heart. To have a Padawan so gifted who was capable of being so wrong—it was his gift to be able to teach him. It was his burden as well.

At first he could not even look at Anakin. He had to concentrate on the matter at hand.

## Jude Watson

Rana Halion tried to glide away from him, but with a lifted lightsaber he stopped her. "How dare you!" she cried. "I assure you, I have no idea what this renegade band is doing here. My security team alerted me that there was a break-in and I arrived to see a battle." Her eyes swept the secret squad as if she had never seen them before.

"And why did you send in droids to attack a Jedi?" Siri asked.

"How ridiculous. I didn't know there was a Jedi here," Rana Halion said. "We sent in the droids because it is the usual procedure when there is a security breach."

The girl called Marit raised her chin and fixed Rana with a contemptuous stare. "She is lying," she said. "About everything. I'm not a student anymore, but I can see I've learned my first real lesson today. Betrayals are the way the galaxy works." She looked at Anakin.

He shook his head at her, as if to apologize. "I believed in what you believed," he said.

"Then you were as foolish as I was," Marit said softly.

"You'll take her word over mine?" Rana Halion huffed.

"This is a matter for the Senate to sort out," Siri said. "These students will testify, no doubt. They've already been expelled, so they'll certainly be available."

"Expelled? I don't think so," Gillam said. "I want to talk to my father!"

"Your father might not want to talk to you after he discovers that you were trying to set him up for murder," Obi-Wan said.

"Who told such lies?" Gillam asked. "I barely escaped my captors with my life. She kidnapped me!" he shrieked, pointing at Rana Halion.

"You scrawny brat!" Rana cried.

Ferus held up Gillam's datapad. "You might want to reconsider what you're saying, Gillam. Do you recognize this?"

Gillam went pale, but only for a moment. "I don't know what he's talking about. I don't even know him. I've never seen that datapad. He's just another jealous student, no doubt."

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

"No, he is a Jedi," Siri said.

Gillam looked alarmed. "He's a Jedi, too?"

"They're everywhere," Tula said, dazed.

"I never realized how much you lie," Marit said to Gillam. "You breathe, you lie. This squad was never about us. It wasn't about banding together to do something good. It was really all about you. And if you think the rest of us are going to support your lies, you're not only a liar, you're crazy. Like you said, Gillam, we all have nothing left to lose."

"Affirmatively true," Ze said, and Tula nodded.

Gillam looked flustered. He opened his mouth and then clamped it shut. He crossed his arms. "I want to see my father," he repeated.

"You'll see him soon enough," Siri said. "We're taking you all to Coruscant. The Senate authorities can straighten out this mess."

Siri led a protesting Rana Halion away. Ferus herded the squad toward the open doors of the hangar.

Obi-Wan was left alone with Anakin. At last it was time for him to speak to his Padawan. Yet he could not find the right words. He knew, glancing at his Padawan's eager face, that Anakin meant well from the bottom of his heart. If Obi-Wan saw a shadow on that heart, he knew it would pain his Padawan to know it. In many ways, Anakin was still a boy. A wounded, loving, anxious boy with great gifts he did not fully understand.

Yet he was also a young man, close to maturity, who could do great harm. To others, yes. To himself, most of all.

"They were going to conduct a raid on Andara," Anakin said, tired of Obi-Wan's silence. "But first they were going to kill me—"

"I know," Obi-Wan said. "Everything was on Gillam's datapad. Which you would have known if you had searched for Ferus."

Anakin flushed. "I didn't know where he was."

"You did not look."

## Jude Watson

"I thought perhaps he was on Ieria or Andara. I thought the secret squad knew where he was—"

"You did not even *look*!" Obi-Wan shouted. "Your fellow Jedi was missing, and you did not even look!"

"I thought it best to continue under cover," Anakin said. His face showed his surprise at Obi-Wan's harshness. Obi-Wan never raised his voice. "I had infiltrated the squad. I thought my best chance of finding both Gillam and Ferus was to continue."

"You were willing to participate in a raid that would have started a war," Obi-Wan continued. He had to struggle to keep his voice level. He needed to keep as calm as possible.

"I didn't know about the raid!" Anakin protested. "I mean, I knew they were going to do something, but it was a dry run, designed to show the Andarans that they had the capability of invading their airspace. I didn't know they had plans to destroy their fleet. As soon as I did, I sabotaged the laser cannons."

"Anakin, you left your fellow Jedi imprisoned and went off on a mission with a group of beings who you had no reason to trust," Obi-Wan said. "You were wrong at every point. Can't you see that?"

Anakin said nothing.

"You did not contact me to tell me Ferus was missing—"

"I would have compromised our cover—"

"You had a responsibility!" Obi-Wan's voice cut like a laser whip. "Just as I had one to Siri. You betrayed me and the Order by your actions. And your inability to see that troubles me the worst of all."

"I am sorry, Master."

Obi-Wan shook his head. Grief rose in him. "Those are words you speak so easily, Padawan."

Anakin's mouth closed in a line. "I don't know what you want from me."

*Honesty. Loyalty. Patience. Obedience.* Obi-Wan thought these things but did not say them. Because, after all, they were only words, too.

## STAR WARS: The School of Fear

"I can only show you the path," Obi-Wan said. "You must choose to walk on it."

"I just..." Anakin stopped. He took a ragged breath. "I thought you would be proud of me."

*I am proud of you.* Obi-Wan wanted to say the words. They were true. He was proud of so much in Anakin. But now was not the time to tell him that.

Or was it?

*Help me, Qui-Gon.*

But no matter how hard Obi-Wan listened, he could not hear the quiet wisdom of his Master. And now it was too late. Siri returned and signaled to him. It was time to go.

"I will take this matter up with the Council," he said.

"Of course," Anakin said. "The Council. We can't take a step without it."

"That's enough!" Obi-Wan snapped. "Come. The others are waiting."

Anakin hesitated. The set of his mouth was stubborn.

"Come, Padawan." Obi-Wan's tone rang with authority. Anakin's hesitation cast a chill on his heart.

Anakin followed him. Obi-Wan did not glance back again.

He felt shaken. Did Anakin understand that he had violated an essential part of the Jedi code? Did he know he had broken something between them? He had not fully trusted Obi-Wan. And so Obi-Wan had lost his trust in him.

*Not for good,* he tried to reassure himself. *And maybe not for long.*

Still, his step was heavy as he climbed up the loading ramp of the transport. His anger faded. Left behind was a feeling he was not used to experiencing. It was fear.



**End of Volume One**  
**Concluded In Volume Two**





## About the Author

JUDE WATSON is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the Jedi Quest and Jedi Apprentice series, as well as the Star Wars Journals *Darth Maul*, *Queen Amidala*, and *Princess Leia: Captive to Evil*. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest.



# About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.